

## Intrinsicly Evil

Chapter 4 from Edward Stourton's book, *Absolute Truth – The Catholic Church in the World Today*, 1998 Viking Publishers. Book accompanied the BBC television series of the same name.

I do not think it is a sin, but I am fairly sure it is bad form, to bet on a future beatification. Nevertheless I am tempted to see what odds I can get on an obscure Polish nun I met in Zambia. Unfortunately Sister Leonia is younger than I am, so I will probably not be around to collect my winnings when she becomes a candidate for canonization.

She arrived at the Chilanga community of the Sisters of Mercy of St Charles Borromeo in 1992. A trained nurse, she began working in a shanty-town a mile or so from the convent. The Freedom Compound may have been so named to inspire hope among those who live there, but poverty keeps most enslaved in squalor. Ten is the age at which the girls are considered old enough to offer their services to the community as 'commercial workers'- prostitutes. The official statistics put the number of people infected with the H I V virus in Zambia at 1.4 million - a frightening figure in a country of just nine million inhabitants. But Sister Leonia believed that the government figures did not tell the full story. She conducted a survey of her own in the Freedom Compound, giving H I V tests to all the patients who came to her for more run-of-the-mill complaints like malaria and TB. Of the first 100, 93 were positive.

In the autumn of 1997 Sister Leonia opened the first and only Aids hospice in sub-Saharan Africa. In their homes, she found, Aids victims were often left to die without dignity. Most of the families she works with are very poor and very large - sometimes with ten or twelve children - so 'when someone is very, very sick they are just left in the corner of the house. The priority is given to those who are still alive.' Ignorance about the disease compounds the problem: 'They don't know what to do - they don't know that they can get some help. So they leave the patient in a corner without water, without a mattress and without a blanket.'

The hospice has only fourteen beds. When I visited it, not long after it opened, Sister Leonia had watched twenty-two people die there in the previous six weeks. One had been buried that morning, and she made her way through the Freedom Compound's muddy red laterite roads to see the young man's family. His wife had died of Aids the previous year, and all three of the children they had left behind were H I V positive. It is customary to move the deceased's furniture outside during the period of mourning, and the man's family and friends sat in front of his hut on grubby armchairs and wooden stools, debating the future of his orphans.

Sister Leonia was both cheerful and compassionate in the face of the misery around her, yet unaffected and unfussy in the way she spoke of the religious faith that drove her on. It seemed cruel to put her on the spot, and I desperately wanted *not* to ask her the obvious awkward question: what did she think of the Church's teaching on the use of condoms? Loyal servant of the Church that she is, she took a deep breath before replying.

'We don't promote condoms in the Catholic Church. But only someone who is very far away from this problem could say, "Never, and that's the end of the discussion" . . . If you are in the middle of the problem, you would never say that. I have an example. I am talking to a man, as I am to you now, and he says, "Sister, I know you are a nurse, so you must have condoms, could you give me some? I just came here to work and I shall be working here for a few months." And I see, looking into this man's eyes, that it is useless talking to him about morality. He was so innocent. Of course I can't say, "Get a condom and go ahead," but I do say, "If you can't control yourself it is much better for you, your family and the person you are

going to meet to use a condom.'"

She said that friends from Poland would tackle her over her departure from the Church's teaching, telling her that she was failing in her duty as a nun; with an expressive lapse in her English she said that she tells them, 'I am also a human being and I am touching the problem. It's my opinion, and I hope God will forgive me for it.'

When the seeds of Sister Leonia's rebellion were sown, Aids was a nightmare in the distant future. The Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, Family and Births was created by Pope John XXIII in March 1963. In Europe the debate over artificial contraception has been about self-fulfilment versus obedience. In the developing world it has been and remains an issue of life and death. That dichotomy was reflected in the commission's creation. It was the brainchild of one of the most forceful and prominent of all the progressives, Cardinal Leon Suenens, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels. Informed by the priorities of a sophisticated northern European laity, which was beginning to question the Church's teaching about sex, he suggested the commission to Pope John in the hope that it would lead to 'at least a reform of the old idea, the more children the better'. But part of its appeal to the Pope was the need for an intellectual framework to challenge the growing anxiety over the population explosion in the developing world.

The United Nations' first ever conference on world-population problems was due to be held in 1964. Until then the issue had been kept off the international agenda by what John Marshall, one of the original members of the commission, describes as an 'unholy alliance', which consisted of the Church, Communist governments who believed that a Marxist economy could provide for unlimited population growth, and African nations, which saw population control as a Western plot to keep their numbers down. But once the commission was agreed, the Vatican realized that it needed to sharpen its doctrinal swords.

The way the commission developed provided a new model for theological inquiry, and one that reflected the changes now evident in the working of the Second Vatican Council. While the Council experimented with democracy, the commission took the first steps towards an empirical approach to a theological problem: working through it from the bottom upwards instead of the top down, and giving human experience due weight next to the Church's understanding of revealed Truth. It began in unimpeachably old Roman style: six people, all men, met at a Belgian hotel called the House in the Woods in October 1963. The meeting was a closely guarded secret - indeed, the very existence of the commission had not been officially admitted. 'That's the Vatican way, isn't it?' was the only reason John Marshall could offer me. 'Everything is always a secret. Goodness knows why, but *they* have always operated on that basis.'

John Marshall was asked to be a member because he had undertaken a study of the reliability of the rhythm method of contraception - 'Vatican roulette', as it had become known. There was one other doctor, an economist, and three priests - a Dominican diplomat and two Jesuits, one a demographer and the other a sociologist. They seem to have had little idea of the explosive and volatile nature of the material they were handling: 'Subsequently it was clear that people's lives had been in turmoil for quite a while, but that had not surfaced then,' says Marshall. There was certainly no sign that they planned to challenge traditional teaching. The Church's view had been laid down by Plus XI in 1930: 'base', 'indecent', 'sin against nature', 'intrinsically vicious' are among the anathemas he hurled at artificial contraception in the encyclical *Casti Connubii*. The six men who met in the countryside near Louvain thirty-three years later described past papal statements on contraception as 'luminous teachings'. Their task was not to challenge those teachings, but to find a palatable and coherent way of presenting them to the world. But they also recognized that the theological basis for the Church's teachings was unclear. Setting a pattern that became a hallmark of the commission's

development, they asked for help. Pope Paul -John had died before his commission met - agreed to expand the membership to give the demographers, doctors and economists the theological back-up they needed. The seven new members he named included five theologians, one of whom, Father Bernard Haring, was notoriously liberal. It confirmed John Marshall's conviction that Paul was genuinely open to advice.

From its second session the commission moved to Rome. It was still exclusively male, and its deliberations sometimes had a surreally scholarly quality, which sat uneasily with the intimate issues under debate: 'Occasionally friends of a member who happened to be in Rome would be asked to dinner, and you would see a look of astonishment on their faces as the pros and cons of coitus interruptus were discussed over coffee,' Marshall remembers. But by the summer of 1964 the debate about the Church's position on contraception was being fought out in speeches and articles in the Catholic and secular press all over the world. The commission became a political hot potato. Pope Paul officially confirmed its existence on 23 June, the first anniversary of his papal coronation, and the tone of his announcement seemed to confirm his reputation as a truly modern pope, open to the challenges and opportunities the second half of the twentieth century had to offer: the study of these 'extremely complex and delicate questions' must be undertaken, he said, 'in the light of scientific, social and psychological truths'.

But there was a check in the apparently relentless progress of the progressive agenda - another hint that, with the benefit of hindsight, Paul might not be quite as open to the possibility of change as he appeared. In October the Second Vatican Council was considering the chapter on marriage in what was to become *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World. Inevitably, the issue of contraception was raised, even though it was an issue the Pope had reserved for his own judgement and the consideration of his commission. It prompted one of the most famous interventions of Vatican II, a passionate plea for the possibility of change from Cardinal Suenens. In a challenge to the understanding of sex that lay at the heart of the Church's position, he turned to the book of Genesis: 'Hasn't there been too much emphasis,' he asked, 'on the passage "Increase and multiply" and not enough on another phrase, which says, "And they shall be one flesh"?' Before he sat down to prolonged applause, Cardinal Suenens gave special emphasis to this: 'I beg of you, my brother bishops, let us avoid a new "Galileo Affair". One is enough for the Church.'

It was a prophetic warning. It took centuries for the Church to admit it had made a mistake when it condemned Galileo; not until 1992 did the Vatican officially accept that he had been right when he said that the earth revolved around the sun. To many Catholics the Church's continued ban on artificial contraception seems just as absurd as its refusal to accept the truth of Galileo's discovery. But it is caught similarly by the difficulty it has in admitting error.

Several days later, while addressing another topic altogether, Cardinal Suenens made what amounted to an apology for his Galileo speech. It had not been his intention, he said, to call into doubt doctrine 'authentically and definitively proclaimed by the Church's magisterium'. It was generally assumed that the Belgian Cardinal had been rebuked by the Pope for overstepping the mark.

The critical point in the development of the commission, when the possibility of change seemed to become a reality, came with the appointment of lay people to its membership. 'Those of us who were approaching it from a scientific point of view,' John Marshall says, 'realized that the man and woman in the street - or the man and woman in bed - ought also to have a say in the matter. It wasn't just high theology or science, it was human involvement and feelings and experience as well.' It was the first time in the Church's history that non-specialist lay people, women among them, had been asked to help determine the Church's

mind on such a momentous question. Patty Crowley still does not know why she and her husband Pat were chosen to be part of it. They were a middle-aged, middle-class Chicago couple. They were grass-roots Catholic activists; they had been deeply involved in the Christian Family Movement, which organized 'cells' to study ways of making the Christian message relevant to modern marriage. But the letter asking them to go to Rome came out of the blue in November 1964.

Years later Patty was convinced that she and the other new lay members of the commission were recruited because they were considered safe. She had been left sterile after the birth of her fourth child in the late 1940s, so the issue did not touch her directly, and she, like all those invited to join, had a record of unswerving loyalty to the Church. She said she had never so much as considered questioning the Church's teaching on birth control: 'We would never have thought to disobey the Church in any way. That's the way we grew up - I think most Catholics who grew up and went to Catholic schools said, "You follow what the Pope says and that's it."'

The commission members who gathered in Rome for its next meeting now numbered fifty-five. The Vatican had not worked out how to handle married couples: when Patty and her husband arrived at the Spanish College, where the commission's later sessions were held, 'Pat had to stay at the monastery while I went down the road a few miles to stay with the nuns. It was quite a shock.' She believes the decisive contribution she and her husband made to the commission's work was put in train almost absent-mindedly: 'We were just an ordinary couple, we weren't doctors, we weren't demographers ... They didn't know what to do with us. So they asked us to do this survey of couples and what they thought of the rhythm method.'

Using the network they had built up through the Christian Family Movement, the Crowleys quickly produced the widest survey ever made of grass-roots Catholic opinion on such a sensitive issue. They collected responses from some three thousand couples in eighteen countries. The letters and questionnaires are now preserved in the archives of Notre Dame University, and Patty revisited some when she collaborated with the American writer Robert McClory on *Turning Point*, their account of the commission's work. Here is a sample of the catalogue of human pain the Crowleys collected:

I bend over backwards to avoid raising false hopes on my husband's part. This sounds ridiculous, but / stiffen at a kiss on the cheek, instantly reminded that I must be discreet. I withdraw in other ways too, afraid to be an interesting companion, gay or witty or charming, hesitant about being sympathetic ...

The slightest upset, mental or physical, appears to change the cycle and thereby renders this method of family planning useless ... My husband has a terrible weakness when it comes to self-control in sex and unless his demands are met in every way when he feels this way, he is a very dangerous man to me and my daughters.

Following my third pregnancy in two years I almost smothered the baby with a pillow because / couldn't stand its crying. We have three sick kids at home, another kicking in my stomach, and a husband full of booze. / have lived on hope, hope in God, hope in taking a long time for the next pregnancy, hope that someone understands my problem.

'The pain in those letters was heart-rending,' says Patty, 'and we just couldn't imagine that the Church could expect such sacrifice and obedience from couples.'

While the Crowleys were collating the results of their research, Pope Paul was making his unprecedented address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, whose focus was not

birth control. He gave a broad overview of what he saw as the challenges facing the modern world, and the speech was famous for a rallying cry that caught the sixties spirit: *Jamais plus la guerre! Jamais plus la guerre!* or 'No More War' as the anti-Vietnam war demonstrators would soon be writing on their placards. But he also touched on the population explosion that was causing so much concern to the world's leaders, and there was nothing in what he said to suggest that he was preparing the way for a change in the Church's teaching: 'You deal here with human life, and human life is sacred; no one should dare to assault it. Respect for life, in regard to the great problem of natively, should find here in your assembly its highest affirmation and its most reasoned defence. Your task is so to improve food production so that there will be enough for all the tables of mankind, and not to press for artificial control of births, which would be irrational, so as to cut down the number of guests at the banquet of life.'

When the commission reconvened for its final session in April 1966, the Crowleys took the results of their research with them. In a long and detailed speech, Patty presented the commission with her evidence of what she called 'the anguish experienced by some faithful Catholics', and it was, she believes, 'the letters that convinced the theologians'. She refrained from quoting directly some of the pointed messages for the gale celibates around the table - this cage frog a couple with six children: 'Any priest or bishop who advocates rhythm should take his rectal temperature for a few weeks.'

John Marshall confirms the impact of the Crowleys' letters. It would be wrong to conclude that the commission members who supported the traditional Church line were cruel or had chosen to inflict deliberate pain on the faithful. It was rather that - celibate academics as most of them were - they had no understanding of what ordinary Catholics were suffering. 'Those who had come to it from a purely academic point of view, either in terms of population statistics or theology in the abstract, were increasingly astonished at the openness of these people who were willing to share their experience with the Crowleys,' he says. This powerful empirical evidence of the true state of feeling about birth control in the wider Church cage not from dissidents but from loyal Catholics. Their relationship with the Christian Family Movement through which the survey had been conducted proved their commitment, so it was reasonable to assume that their views were, if anything, more loyal than those that prevailed in the Church as a whole.

Beyond the walls of the Spanish College where the commission met, a new way of judging religious truth was evolving in the Church. Cardinal Basil Hume found that his pupils 'didn't want to know what was true when you taught them, they wanted to know what religion meant to you, what you thought about it and whether it had changed your life'. Patty Crowley's letters brought that approach to the heart of the Church as it sought its own mind on an issue that in the past would have been argued through exclusively by theologians. And, like Sister Leonia in Zambia thirty years later, many theologians on the commission changed their minds when they saw the reality of the impact of the Church's laws.

There was a memorable exchange during the subsequent debate. Father Marcelino Zalba, a conservative Jesuit, voiced the perennial Vatican objection to change: that the Church would have to admit that it had got it wrong in the past. 'What then with the millions we have sent to hell, if these norms were not valid?' he demanded.

'Father Zalba,' shot back Patty Crowley, 'do you really believe God has carried out all your orders?'

'Of course I got a kick out of it because everyone started laughing,' she remembers, 'but I didn't think it was funny.'

Those on the other side of the argument did not think it funny either. Fighting alongside

Father Zalba was another doughty conservative Jesuit, the American John Ford. A liberal American theologian recalls a late-night debate with Father Ford that ended with this telling insight into the doubts beneath the apparently adamant certainty of the Jesuit's public position. 'You can give me all the reasons you want,' he said, 'but my problem is much more personal and existential. You might say my whole life has been involved in this. Now, are you telling me, as I'm thinking of retirement, that God allowed me to be wrong all that time, and God allowed the Church to be wrong? Instead of helping people, have we really been hurting them? How could the Holy Spirit allow that to happen?'

Cardinal Ottaviani seems to have spent much of this period snoozing. 'He really just sat there,' says Patty, 'I don't think he participated very much ... They'd have to end meetings because he was asleep.' John Marshall confirms this: 'Cardinal Ottaviani never gave the impression of really listening to the debates or realizing that a new thinking was afoot.' He believes that the head of the Holy Office disapproved of the commission's very existence. 'He regarded it as a kind of aberration in the life of the Church.'

And there was one intriguing absentee from the commission's final debates: Cardinal Karol Wojtyla had been appointed as an expert in the field. In 1960, as a newly ordained bishop with an academic bent, he had published a philosophy of relationships called *Love and Responsibility*. It was remarkable for combining a modern approach to sex with traditional teaching. It accepted that sex could be for pleasure, not just procreation, but reasserted the Church's stand on birth control.

Would the future pope's view have changed if he had been exposed to Patty Crowley's letters? It is tempting to imagine that her American openness and directness might have made their mark on the Middle European intellectual that he then was; the impact on the future of the Church could have been incalculable. But Karol Wojtyla never took his seat on the Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, Family and Births. He was too busy with the great mission of his life: the struggle against Communism. The Polish primate, Stefan Wyszyński, had been denied permission to leave Poland by the authorities, and the Archbishop of Krakow stayed at home to demonstrate his solidarity.

Cardinal Ottaviani waited to fight his battle on a field of his own choosing. The commission's final meeting lasted almost three months, from the spring into the early summer of 1966. A steady consensus built for change, and when it fell to the bishops to set the seal on the commission's work, they endorsed the now prevailing view among the theologians, lay people and academic experts. On 24 June, they voted on three questions. Is contraception intrinsically evil? Nine said no, three yes, and three abstained. Could contraception be squared with the Church's teaching and its tradition? Nine in favour, five against and one abstention. Should the Church give a definitive answer on the question as soon as possible? Fourteen said yes, and only one bishop voted against.

Later that day the bishops endorsed *Responsible Parenthood*, the majority report of the commission, which recommended that the Pope should change the Church's teaching, and explained why. Four days later it was presented to Paul VI. In due course the whole world knew what it said: the text was printed in full in the American *National Catholic Reporter* and the British weekly the *Tablet*.

Catholics the world over assumed it was a done deal; they could, at last, enjoy their marriages to the full without having to choose between happiness and obedience to the Church. Back home in Britain, John Marshall talked it over with Cardinal Heenan, then Archbishop of Westminster, who had played a prominent part in the commission's final debates. Heenan was uncertain about the right way forward - he had abstained on the question 'Is contraception intrinsically evil?' - but he was in no doubt about the reality of what was going on in the Church: 'It doesn't matter what the Pope says now,' he told Marshall. 'The

people have made up their minds.'

Just over two years later John Marshall was pottering in his garden in Richmond in south-west London when he received a telephone call from the Cardinal: the Pope's long-awaited encyclical was about to be published. The Vatican had been silent since the day the commission ended its work, and Marshall had no more reason than anyone else to doubt that the Pope's conclusions would reflect those of the commission's report: 'The case seemed so convincing that one found it difficult to think that the Vatican would retreat into this bunker mentality,' he says. But Heenan was calling to warn him that that was exactly what was about to happen. They had twenty-four hours to digest the news, and John Marshall drove up to Archbishop's House in Victoria for a conference with the Cardinal.

The Crowleys were asleep when the news came through, and they heard it not from a bishop or a cardinal but from a journalist, who telephoned for a reaction. It was only 2 a.m. Chicago time, but on the morning of 29 July 1968 Europe was buzzing with the news from Rome. 'They told us what the Pope had said,' Patty recalls, 'and we were just dumbfounded. My husband said, "I don't believe it."'

What had happened?

It was shrouded in secrecy, and it was, in the judgement of John Marshall, 'an appalling thing'.

With the original commission dispersed, Cardinal Ottaviani had had the Pope to himself. Paul had already shown his Hamlet-like tendency to prevaricate in the debate on religious liberty at the Council, and there was a hint of the way in which his mind was moving in his treatment of Cardinal Suenens after his Galileo speech. Cardinal Ottaviani went to work.

Three days after *Responsible Parenthood* had been presented to Paul, Cardinal Ottaviani gave him the minority report, which had been produced by the small group of theologians on the commission who dissented from its call for change. Their case was not really about birth control, it was about authority. The argument was simple. For centuries the Church had taught that the purpose of sex was procreation; the Holy Spirit protects the Church from error, and therefore could not have allowed the Church to be wrong for so long. It was Father Ford's existential angst elevated into a theological formula.

It was an argument that held special force for Paul. The cruellest irony of the whole affair was that he took his decision not as a stern and arrogant authoritarian but through an excess of modesty about his own powers as pope. He did not believe himself competent to change a teaching the Church had sustained for so long. We tend to think of *Humanae Vitae* as an illustration of the dangers of investing too much power in the hands of one man, who can then ignore the opinions of others. In fact, Paul felt that the weight of institutional history rendered his own views of no value.

The Crowleys had presented Pope Paul with copies of all the letters they had received in their survey. There is no record of whether or not he read them. Cardinal Konig was of sufficiently senior standing in the hierarchy to talk to the Pope frankly about the issue, and says that Paul did not appreciate the pain of the faithful: 'My impression was that he did not really understand or did not realize that the result would be so many, many problems for families and for the Church.' Others argue that he understood the implications of his decision all too well, and he certainly agonized long and hard before taking it.

A new commission was set up, with the express intention of undoing everything the original commission had achieved. It was not just the conclusions that were rejected: the method of working established during the months of debate at the Spanish College was

unceremoniously abandoned. All the members of the new commission were priests, and had been handpicked for their enthusiasm for the traditional line. 'The great advance of bringing in the lay people to get a wider view of the whole Church, not just the clerical Church,' says Marshall, 'was completely reversed by a commission composed entirely of clerics.'

Cardinal Ottaviani built his team around the four theologians who had held out for the traditional teaching on the original commission. This time, secrecy was sustained. Working steadily through 1967 the new group created the basis for the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. In the autumn of that year, once he was confident that the Pope would support the conservative plan, Cardinal Ottaviani retired. Paul's biographer, Peter Hebblethwaite, describes *Humanae Vitae* as 'Ottaviani's I-told-you-so revenge' for the Council.

At the heart of the encyclical lies the Church's claim to a papal monopoly on the Truth. Jesus Christ, when He communicated His divine power to Peter and the other Apostles and sent them to teach all nations His commandments, constituted them as the authentic guardians and interpreters of the whole moral law,' the encyclical argues. The Church's teaching on sex was an interpretation of a moral law given by God, and could not therefore be changed. Contraception had always been, and therefore would always remain, 'intrinsically evil'.

Some of the theologians who had driven the reforms of Vatican II felt the blow especially heavily. Hans Kung had been *a peritus*, or theological adviser, at the Council. Swiss-born, but now established as a teacher at Tübingen University in southern Germany, he was seen as one of its intellectual stars. By 1968 he was already in trouble with the Church authorities. His book *The Church*, first published in German the year before *Humanae Vitae*, argued for a more democratic Church: 'It is very clear that in the early Church there were no absolutist rulers - even Peter,' he said in an interview at the time. He even hinted at the possibility of popes being chosen by some kind of general election. One of Cardinal Ottaviani's final acts before retirement was to issue a *monitum* (an official warning or instruction) banning translation of Kung's book into other languages.

*Humanae Vitae* gave a new edge to his questioning of the way authority is exercised within the Church. As a ground-swell of rebellion grew across Europe and America, Kung took on the doctrine at the heart of the Church's claim to preach absolute truth: Infallibility. Papal Infallibility had been introduced by Pius IX at the First Vatican Council in 1870. It applies only to a limited set of core Catholic beliefs, such as the Divinity of Christ and the Resurrection, and the circumstances in which the Pope is judged to be speaking infallibly are rare. It does not mean, for example, that if he says a black dog is a white sheep, Catholics are required to believe him. But Kung argued that the reasoning behind *Humanae Vitae* suggested the existence of a wider, creeping doctrine of Infallibility that existed even though the Church did not acknowledge it. The teaching on contraception had not been changed because the Pope did not believe he could challenge what the Church had taught in the past; in other words, the centuries of Church pronouncements on contraception had a kind of Infallible status of their own. Since this supposedly Infallible body of teachings was, as represented in *Humanae Vitae*, not just fallible but - in Kung's judgement and that of vast numbers of the Catholic faithful - plain wrong, the Church's claim to Infallibility was itself called into question. It is the kind of circular argument that makes you dizzy if you think about it for too long, but most people got the basic point: a respected Catholic theologian was arguing that a Church dumb enough to try banning contraception could not go on claiming it was always right.

Kung's 1970 book *Infallible?* was published to mark the centenary of the promulgation of the doctrine and set him on a collision course with Rome. He fought a dogged battle with the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith - as the old Holy Office was now called - over the orthodoxy of his views throughout the 1970s, and in 1979 the Church withdrew his

right to teach as an approved Catholic theologian.

The offence caused by Kung's rebellious views was compounded by the manner in which he conducted his campaign. Instead of meekly accepting correction from Rome, he behaved as if the Second Vatican Council really had turned the Church into an open society and a democracy. He demanded the, civil rights that democratic citizens have come to expect. 'The problem,' he told me, 'was that I asked for fair procedure, and especially to see my files. There is no criminal in the world who is not allowed to see his files. What are the accusations? Where are the witnesses and so on? But that was always declined.'

It set a pattern that has been repeated many times since. And, in the end, it was the Church as much as Hans Kung that had to face a painful lesson. When his licence to teach was withdrawn, Tübingen University moved his chair out of the Catholic theology faculty and gave it an autonomous status so that he could continue to work. The Church might not be an open society, but its discipline is ineffective in societies that are.

It was not just progressive theologians who were reflecting on the impact of the encyclical on the authority of the Church and the Pope. The world's bishops were being asked to promulgate a teaching that most of them knew would be almost impossible to sell to the faithful. During the two years that had elapsed since the end of the commission's deliberations, many Catholics had taken matters into their own hands, unwilling to go through any further marital misery while they awaited a decision most believed was a foregone conclusion. Often, they had done so with the encouragement of a parish priest, and it was scarcely likely that they would revert to the old ways.

Some priests challenged the Church publicly. On 20 October 1968 a group of fifty-five wrote a letter of protest to *The Times*. John Marshall, who wrote separately to *The Times* to disassociate himself from certain specific points in the encyclical that he felt were scientifically wrong, had great sympathy for them: priests, he said, 'were involved in the personal situation of their parishioners and at the same time were supposed to be official representatives of the Church. That put them in an impossible position.'

On 24 September 1968 the bishops of England and Wales issued a statement designed to meet the tide of rebellion that was sweeping through Britain's Catholics. 'In the heat of the controversy,' they state sternly, 'some writers appear to have forgotten that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ. It is for him to issue encyclical letters whenever he thinks it is his duty to do so.' But the tone of the statement suggests that the bishops rather wished he had not thought it his duty to issue this particular encyclical:

It was widely believed that a change in the Church's attitude would be announced. Understandably, many wives and husbands, anticipating the promised statement of the Pope, have come to rely on contraception. In this they have acted conscientiously and often after seeking pastoral advice. They may now be unable to see that, at least in their personal circumstances, the use of contraception is wrong. A particular difficulty faces those who after serious thought and prayer cannot as yet understand or be fully convinced of the doctrines as laid down.

The bishops' instructions to such people are so tentative that they can hardly be described as instructions: They should pray for light to understand the doctrine taught by the encyclical.

It is not unreasonable to ask all to practise the Christian virtue of humility and acknowledge the duty of every Catholic to listen with respect to the voice of the Vicar of Christ.

This was not the voice of thunder in which the Church of old was accustomed to hurl its

anathemas of condemnation against the modern world. It is not surprising that so many people were so confused. First, the Council had torn up and thrown away many of the certainties with which they had grown up, and they had gradually come round to the idea of participating more fully in the life of the Church and exercising their consciences more freely. Now the Pope had issued an instruction that seemed to take Church teaching back to the Middle Ages. It almost made things worse that their bishops tried to impose this thoroughly unreasonable ruling in the reasoned language of the modern Church.

It led to something entirely new in the history of Catholicism: a wave of conscientious dissent from a major Church teaching. For the first time ever, a great mass of Catholics, while continuing to regard themselves as faithful members of the Church, chose to disobey a clear papal instruction. 'I think it is tragic,' says Archbishop Hurley of Durban, 'that there can be such a gap between official teaching and the great majority of people.' Denis Hurley has retired, and is able to speak frankly about *Humanae Vitae* in a way those still holding senior positions cannot. But even serving archbishops acknowledge that the impact of the encyclical went far beyond the matter at issue. 'It did call into question the authority of the Church,' says Cardinal Hume, 'and I think that has been a bit the pattern subsequently. People have often said, "Well, that's what the Church used to say but we aren't certain it's right.'" With the revolt over *Humanae Vitae* the subjective approach to moral choice entered the Catholic Church. Cardinal Konig describes its impact like this: 'Nowadays everyone feels, "I don't need a general rule, I need no law to organize society and Church life, I make the rules myself "'

I met Patty Crowley in her eighty-eighth floor apartment in a tower overlooking Lake Michigan; the lake-front glistened into infinity in both directions, and swimming-pools on top of less majestic skyscrapers looked like little blue puddles below. Her husband Pat died in 1974, but the walls are crammed with photos of smiling children getting married, and grandchildren graduating. The drawing room was hung with good modern paintings and religious art, and in the dining room stood a wonderful beaten-silver relief of the Last Supper. But amid the abundant evidence of well-financed good taste, energetic intelligence and wholesome happiness, there was still a wound from the way in which she had been treated by the Church.

Once the commission had finished its work no one wrote to the Crowleys or spoke to them. No one thanked them or explained why their advice had been ignored. 'It hurt us,' she said. 'We didn't ask

for this, they gave it to us. They asked us to come to Rome. We listened, and we tried to understand both sides and we just felt after we read the letters and we talked to couples that the Church had to change.'

When Cardinal Bernadin became Archbishop of Chicago he asked for letters from people who had been hurt by the Church and Patty wrote to him about her experience on the commission. There was silence for a year and then she received a standard letter. The Cardinal's tenure in Chicago was cut short by illness, and not long before he died he telephoned Patty out of the blue and asked if he could come to see her. Somewhat taken aback, Patty agreed, and he walked over immediately.

They sat together in her drawing room for an hour during which she poured out her feelings about what had happened. He kissed her as he left and asked for her prayers. She took it as a kind of apology. A month later he was dead.

That kind of unspoken admission of error is symptomatic of the way in which the Church in America has coped with *Humanae Vitae*. Charles Curran, a prominent professor of theology at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC, was driven, like Hans Kung, into open dissent by the encyclical. He held a press conference to denounce it at the

Mayflower Hotel on Washington's Connecticut Avenue -just a stone's throw from the White House and about as high-profile a location for a protest as it is possible to find anywhere. As a result, again like Hans Kung, he found himself embroiled in a long battle with the guardians of orthodoxy in Rome. But today he is relaxed about the double standards at the heart of Catholic life that have resulted from the birth-control encyclical: 'Can one dissent and still be a Roman Catholic? That's the view of the folks,' he says succinctly. And he regards it as 'a positive sign', evidence of a mature Church.

The overwhelming majority of married American Catholics use artificial birth control when it suits them. Yet the American Church remains one of the healthiest in the world. The three years I spent living in America taught me what it is to belong to a living Church. Instead of the rather gaunt and empty Victorian building in South London to which I would drag myself more out of duty than devotion, I found a church bursting at the seams with people and enthusiasm.

In London what I did on Sunday mornings was regarded as a little eccentric; at the Blessed Sacrament Church in Chevy Chase, Maryland, so many people turned up for Mass that car-parking was a real problem.

Father Andrew Greeley, chronicler of the contemporary Church and tireless interpreter of its statistical profile, believes 'the American Catholic Church down in the grass-roots, down in the parishes, is very strong. Where there is a pastoral leadership that is sensitive and secure, the typical American neighbourhood parish has more generosity working probably than at any time since we got out of Jerusalem.' He says the level of defections in the American Church - those who were born Catholic and leave the Church - is running at about 15 per cent, roughly the same level as it was in 1960. American Catholics seem to have shrugged off the rupture between the Church's teaching and their own experience.

But not all Catholics were able to adjust so easily to the lie they were required to live. And in Europe, where secularism in society as a whole was more advanced and the national Churches were older and less vigorous, the impact of the encyclical was especially destructive. When you have been brought up to believe that every moral choice you make carries with it the possibility of eternal damnation, it is *difficult* to treat a matter of such moment in a cavalier fashion. The new 'pick-your-own' Catholicism identified by Cardinal Hume did not square with many people's understanding of what religion should be.

Thousands of Catholics left the Church over *Humanae Vitae*, and often it was the most committed who led the way. That rigid Catholic belief in the unity of Truth, which had once kept them to the Church's teaching on birth control, now drove them away. One woman who abandoned her faith because of the encyclical put it to me like this: 'It became rather like going into a supermarket and you pick up your basket and go round the shelves picking up the bits of moral theology that appeal to you. It is a sort of self-access form of religion, and we felt it should be a seamless garment where our experience in the world was not at odds with our experience of the Church.'

Paul VI went into a state of intellectual shell-shock after the reaction to *Humanae Vitae*. He never wrote another encyclical: it was as if his capacity to offer decisive moral guidance had been exhausted.

After the creative explosion of the Council, the Church seemed to go into a holding pattern. For a decade between the encyclical and the death of Pope Paul VI all its energies were consumed in adjusting to the aftermath of revolution and counter-revolution. Grumpy old Catholics muttered about the new Mass and gradually got used to it. Enthusiastic young priests tried guitars and tambourines, then realized they could not abandon the past altogether. Everyone wondered what to do about *Humanae Vitae*, and most concluded that a decent

silence was the appropriate response. The subjective morality ushered in by the way Catholics had reacted to the encyclical brought with it terrifying questions that threatened the foundations of the Church's authority: perhaps the Church did not matter quite so much as we had all thought; perhaps it did not hold the keys to Paradise, after all; perhaps we could defy its teaching without automatic condemnation to eternal damnation. The churches and seminaries emptied steadily.

That at least was the way it looked from Western Europe. The Church in the sixties was about bells, smells and sex, and the Vatican had told us we could not enjoy any of them.

Only now do I appreciate the energies released in the rest of the Church by the events of the sixties. While we were agonizing about incense and condoms, the rest of the Church was locked in a struggle for Freedom and Food.

Chapter 4 from Edward Stourton's book, *Absolute Truth – The Catholic Church in the World Today*, 1998 Viking Publishers. Book accompanied the BBC television series of the same name.