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The Church 1977



Fr. Andrew Greeley

I propose to return to last year's controversy over the impact of the birth control encyclical on Catholic religious behavior—not because I have nothing else to fight about this week but because it is of immense importance, if one wishes to get the Church out of the slump it is in, that one understand precisely why the slump is there.

My colleagues and I argued last year (with overwhelming evidence) that the decline in Catholic religious practice was the result not of the Vatican Council, nor of some long-term secularization trend, but rather of a highly specific issue—birth control—and a highly specific event—the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*.

As could be expected of men in their position, many Church leaders felt the need to repudiate the argument publicly, however much they might have agreed with it privately. But a number of other Catholics—book reviewers, editorial writers and other such professional wisepersons—contended that the explanation was too simple, that there were other factors at work, other things which were going on during the 1960s (three sociologists from Notre Dame pointed to the Father Groppi marches as something else that was "going on").

On "a priori" grounds the critics seemed to have a point; a lot of other things were happening during the 1960s and they ought to have had an impact on Catholic religious practice. The trouble for us in

responding to this common sense argument was that the critics were either unwilling or unable to study our mathematical models carefully and would not specify exactly which other explanations ought to be tested (save for the N. D. Groppi march explanation—but then Notre Dame is not No. 1 in sociology).

My colleagues and I, thanks to a brilliant new software system developed by Professor Norman Nie, have returned to analysis of our data. One of the things which was certainly "going on" in America during the 1960s was a revolution in sexual permissiveness—not necessarily an increase in the sheer number of sexual acts as an increase in toleration of various kinds of sexual activity. There was a Catholic reflection of this "sexual revolution" and one of monumental size.

In 1963, for example, 69 per cent of American Catholics thought that the ideal family size was more than three children; in 1974, this had declined 30 percentage points. In the first time point only 29 per cent of the respondents agreed that husband and wife might have sexual intercourse for pleasure alone; the percentage changed to 51 per cent. The proportion rejecting strongly the assertion that a family should have as many children as possible and God will provide for them went from 23 per cent to 58 per cent.

This "sexual revolution" among American Catholics is a profoundly important event for the Church, a phenomenon which ought to be taken with the utmost seriousness: large families are no longer the ideal; sex may be divorced from procreation; pleasure is a legitimate goal of sexual activity. The change represents a complete reversal of what the ordinary Catholic perception of the official and religious purpose of marriage and sex is.

One would certainly expect that such a change

would have a considerable impact on Catholic religious behavior. I know I did; I was sheepishly forced to back away from my "encyclical explanation," eating a little crow in the process.

But the relish went back into the cupboard. The "sexual revolution" has had only a minor impact on Catholic religious practice.

Take the decline in church attendance. In our old model 46 per cent was accounted to changing birth control attitudes, and 34 per cent to changing attitudes on papal authority. When the "sexual revolution" variable was put in the model it caused only minor modifications; the "accounting power" of birth control declined to 40 per cent and of papal authority to 25 per cent. The "revolution" accounted for only 15 per cent of the decline in church attendance; changes in attitudes toward papal authority and birth control continued to account for 65 per cent.

There was, in other words, a "sexual revolution" of immense importance; but it didn't drive people away from the Church. It was two highly specific issues—birth control and papal authority—which caused our problems, mostly independent of the "sexual revolution."

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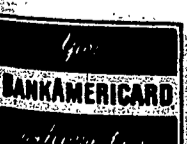
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