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Ready for reform?

This week's issue features our annual Health Care Supplement in which — among other timely topics — experts debate health-care reform. Pull-out after page 6.

HUMANAE VITAE

Debate continues over lasting effects

ROCHESTER — On July 28, 1968, Pope Paul VI released his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* ("of human life.")

Although Pope Paul oversaw the conclusion of Vatican II and implemented the sweeping changes initiated by the council, his 16-year papacy has come to be nearly synonymous with this one document.

And while the encyclical had much to say about marriage, responsible parenthood, the licit regulation of birth through what is now known as Natural Family Planning (see related story), potential declines of marital fidelity and sexual morality, and the gift of sexuality, the letter — and its author — are remembered for reaffirming the Catholic Church's traditional ban on artificial methods of birth control.

"If he had not made that one statement (about birth control), he could very well be considered the greatest pope of the 20th century," remarked Monsignor William H. Shannon, professor emeritus of theology at Nazareth College of Rochester and the author of a 1970 book on the encyclical, *The Lively Debate*.

Supporters of the encyclical, however, have a somewhat different view of Pope Paul and the document.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities, for example, released a July 13, 1993, statement in which it defends the encyclical's teachings and calls Pope Paul "prophetic" for predicting that the spread of birth control would help to lead to increases in "nonmarital cohabitation, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, abortion and divorce."

Reaction to the encyclical was similarly divided when it was released in 1968. A number of theologians and national bishops conferences expressed support.

But even strong support — such as that expressed by the the bishops of the United States — was overshadowed by dissenting views.

One of the most dramatic indications of dissent from the encyclical was expressed two days after its official release. A group of U.S. theologians — led by Father Charles Curran of the Diocese of Rochester, who was, at the time, a theologian at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C — issued what came to be known as the "Washington Statement."

In the statement they argued that *Humanae Vitae* was not infallible teaching, and that under some circumstances, Catholic couples could choose to use artificial means of birth control.

The theologians issuing the statement were not alone in expressing dissent, however. Indeed, Paul VI himself said on Aug. 30, 1968, "May the lively debate aroused by our encyclical lead

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