

Anniversary breaks wall of silence

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

A dysfunctional family is unable to talk openly about a problem that everyone knows is there. In recent years, fairly or not, many have been comparing the Catholic Church to a dysfunctional family.

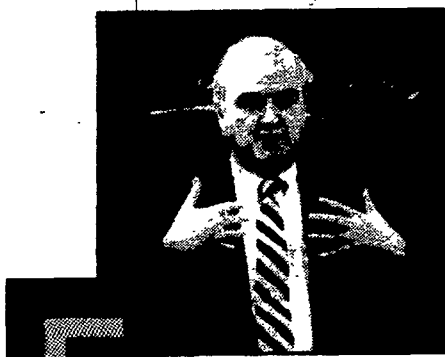
Nowhere are the symptoms of dysfunction more evident than in the church's inability and/or unwillingness to talk openly about its teaching on contraception and about the rejection of that teaching by the great majority of married Catholic couples of child-bearing age.

The 25th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's controversial encyclical on birth control, *Humanae Vitae*, provides an opportunity to break through the wall of silence and to talk openly about a problem that hasn't gone away in the meantime.

Jesuit Father Richard A. McCormick's article on the encyclical in the July 17th issue of *America* seizes that opportunity. It may make disturbing reading for those who don't regard the issue as any longer a debatable question, but others will welcome the essay for its clarity, its balance, and, most of all, its honesty.

Father McCormick reminds us that, from the outset, the encyclical divided even the bishops themselves. Various national episcopal conferences issued guarded statements upon its release in July of 1968.

The Belgian bishops acknowledged that someone who is "competent in the matter under consideration ...



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may, after a serious examination before God, come to other conclusions on certain points. In such a case he has the right to follow his conviction provided that he remains sincerely disposed to continue his inquiry."

Of those who arrived at conclusions different from *Humanae Vitae*, the Scandinavian bishops stated: "No one should, therefore, on account of such divergent opinions alone, be regarded as an inferior Catholic."

The Canadian bishops took a similar stand: "These Catholics should not be considered, or consider themselves, shut off from the body of the faithful."

The U.S. Catholic bishops responded to the outpouring of dissent with a pastoral letter, "Human Life in Our Day," in which they, too, acknowledged the possibility of legitimate dis-

agreement.

Expression of dissent is in order, they conceded, "only if the reasons are serious and well founded, if the manner of the dissent does not question or impugn the teaching authority of the Church and is such as not to give scandal."

Even Pope Paul VI, in a letter to the Congress of German Catholics more than a month after *Humanae Vitae's* release, welcomed "the lively debate aroused by our encyclical," and expressed the hope that the debate would "lead to a better knowledge of God's will."

Unfortunately, that debate was never allowed to mature and polarization quickly set in. An uneasy silence followed.

An attempt was made to reopen the discussion at the 1980 Synod of Bishops on the family, but without success.

Cardinal Basil Hume of England noted that married couples themselves constitute a source for theology. Their difficulty with the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, he declared, should not be written off as a sign of their frailty and weakness.

"They just cannot accept that the use of artificial means of contraception in some circumstances is intrinsically disordered."

Cardinal Hume concluded that if the Synod were to listen to all the different points of view, a right way might be found.

The most interesting intervention, however, was that of Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco.

He noted that many men and women of good will do not accept the "intrinsic evil of each and every use of contraception." Indeed, he said, a majority of priests and theologians, "whose learning, faith, discretion, and dedication to the church are beyond doubt," hold this view.

The problem, he warned, "is not going to be solved or reduced merely by a simple reiteration of past formulations or by ignoring the fact of dissent."

Archbishop Quinn paid a personal price for his straightforwardness. The messenger was attacked because of the message.

With the advantage of hindsight, it is difficult to imagine how his words could have been received in any other way. According to Father Thomas Reese, SJ, a recognized expert on the hierarchy, the organization of the 1980 Synod had ensured that a truly open discussion of the contraception issue could not occur.

Even the lay auditors were carefully chosen from the ranks of the promoters of natural family planning, while the vast majority of Catholic married couples, who practice birth control, were not represented.

If anything, the lid on discussion has been tightened in the intervening years, leading to what Father McCormick calls "a debilitating malaise that has undermined the credibility of the magisterium in other areas."

That's a situation that every Catholic, on whatever side of the issue, can only lament and deplore.

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