

The Battle over Contraception

By Dr. Jeff Mirus | February 03, 2011 6:16 PM

In addition to the Second Vatican Council, the Vatican was dominated in the 1960's by concern about contraception, which was sweeping the Western world with the advent of the Pill. Pope Paul VI did not want to deal with such a sensitive and complex topic at the Council itself, so he empowered a Commission to make recommendations. Most of this work was done after the Council closed. In the end, the majority of the Commission reported that the Church's teaching against contraception was reformable, and recommended that contraception be declared licit.

Meanwhile, a minority of Commission members led by the Jesuit John C. Ford were convinced that the Church's teaching, already articulated by Pius XI and Pius XII, could not be changed. Pope Paul VI himself had doubts about the position of the majority, and Cardinal Ottaviani, who was then the head of the Holy Office, was determined to put the necessary counter-arguments in the Pope's hands. For this purpose, he turned to Fr. Ford, who in turn enlisted a lay moral theologian he had been working with, Germain Grisez.

Pope Paul was persuaded by the arguments of Ford and Grisez. The result was *Humanae vitae*, issued in 1968, which caused an immediate storm of protest among theologians—theologians who had been led by the effective marketing of the so-called Majority Report to believe the Church's teaching would change.

The explosion of dissent, led by Fr. Charles Curran and centered at Catholic University, put Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle of Washington in a difficult position. The Cardinal immediately took steps to properly instruct the people of the Archdiocese and to argue against the dissenters, seeking their retraction. For these purposes, like Cardinal Ottaviani before him, Cardinal O'Boyle turned to Ford and Grisez. Their pastoral booklet was distributed to every family in the Archdiocese, but unlike O'Boyle the majority of the bishops on the Board of Catholic University deemed it prudent to tolerate the reigning theological dissent.

Fr. Ford died in 1989, but Germain Grisez is still with us, known around the world as the author of *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, a comprehensive four-volume guide to moral theology which the author has made freely available on his web site, www.twotlj.org. But now Grisez has added to his site a brief biography of Fr. Ford centering on the contraception controversy. He has also posted the key documents issued by the Commission, along with those that Ford and Grisez authored in the 1960's to help Cardinals Ottaviani and O'Boyle, and especially Pope Paul VI, to preserve and advance traditional Catholic teaching.

The documents often appear in the languages in which they were officially submitted—normally Latin or French—though a significant number of them are available in English. Ford's "Memorandum on The Mentality of Those Who Would Approve Contraception" is a case in point. It was presented in response to Cardinal Ottaviani's concern that the Pope might not rule against the majority if he could not understand why so many of these men could have come to the wrong conclusion.

Moreover, the biographical material is a treasure in itself. Here we have an account of the central role played by Ford (with the help of Grisez) in defending Catholic doctrine against what would rapidly become the root moral scourge of our time. Even for those who cannot read all of the documents, this is an insider's view of one of the most dramatic theological episodes in modern Catholic history.