

Church birth control commission docs unveiled

New records show pope's advisers were stacked in favor of changing Church teaching. Intentionally?
By Russell Shaw - OSV Newsweekly, 2/27/2011

Information provided by a prominent American theologian close to the famous papal "birth control commission" of the 1960s shows it was tilted in favor of changing Church teaching on contraception from the start. Pope Paul VI eventually said no to the commission and reaffirmed Church teaching in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* ("Of Human Life").

The new information depicts the commission's secretary general as a supporter of change who influenced the commission's proceedings to produce that result. It also suggests a substantial number of members and advisers of the body were predisposed in favor of change, or at least more than merely open to it.

Jesuit Father John C. Ford, an American moral theologian with the commission who opposed change, is quoted as saying that far from pushing the commission the other way, Pope Paul "wanted to give the proponents of change every opportunity to make their case."

Favoring an outcome

The new disclosures are contained in a biographical sketch of Father Ford by Germain G. Grisez, who worked with the priest in Rome during a critical period in the commission's proceedings. The sketch appears together with several previously unpublished documents on his website (www.twotlj.org). Grisez is the author of numerous books and articles, including an influential three-volume treatment of moral theology.

In brief, the story he tells is this.

Blessed Pope John XXIII established the Pontifical Commission on Population, Family and Birth-rate — popularly known as the birth control commission — in March 1963, shortly before his death. Its job was to prepare for the Holy See's participation in a conference organized by the United Nations and the World Health Organization.

Dominican Father Henri de Riedmatten of the Vatican's Secretariat of State was named secretary general of the new body. According to Grisez, the priest "single-handedly managed the commission's work," even after Pope Paul, who succeeded Pope John, appointed Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, its president. The priest's support for change could be seen in arranging meeting agendas and shaping documents — including his final report to the pope — to favor this outcome.

Pope Paul expanded the commission's membership and mandate in June 1964. In October he named Father Ford, then teaching at The Catholic University of America, to serve with the body. At that time considered possibly the leading Catholic moral theologian in the United States, the priest had drawn attention during World War II with a stinging critique of American and British saturation bombing of German and Japanese cities.

Teaching 'reformable'

By the time the commission met in the spring of 1965, Grisez reports, 12 of 19 members of its theological section thought the Church's teaching on contraception was "reformable" — it could be changed. Father Ford did not.

The Second Vatican Council, then nearing its close, left the contraception issue to be resolved after the commission finished its work. The pope now reorganized the commission, naming the previous members "expert advisers" to a group of 16 cardinals and bishops who were the actual members. Father de Riedmatten then scheduled a cluster of meetings in spring and summer of 1966, culminating in a June 20-25 gathering of the 16 prelates to reach conclusions.

Father Ford by now was one of a minority of four within the 19-member theological section who supported the Church's teaching against contraception. The others were moral theologians Jesuit Father Marcelino Zalba, Redemptorist Father Jan Visser and sociologist Jesuit Father Stanislas de Lestapis. All were prominent scholars.

At the climactic meeting of cardinals and bishops, Grisez writes, there was "little discussion, and no minds were changed." On the crucial question of whether every contraceptive act is wrong, the vote was 9 no, 3 yes, and 3 abstentions.

Of the commission's three American members, Cardinal Lawrence Shehan of Baltimore and Archbishop (later, Cardinal) John Dearden of Detroit voted no, and Archbishop Leo Binz of St. Paul and Minneapolis voted yes. Archbishop Karol Wojtyla of Krakow — later, Pope John Paul II — who was expected to be a solid vote against contraception, had been prevented from attending the meeting by the communist authorities in Poland.

Cool reception

Father de Riedmatten prepared his final report and submitted it to the pope on June 27. Grisez recalls that he and Father Ford were "appalled" by how biased it was. At Cardinal Ottaviani's request, he and the priest prepared a document rebutting the pro-contraception arguments, and that document also presumably went to Pope Paul.

In the spring of 1967, selected theological documents from the commission, misidentified as the "majority report" and the "minority report," were leaked to some media, evidently to put pressure on Pope Paul. But in July 1968, the pope issued *Humanae Vitae*, which unequivocally affirms that every contraceptive act is wrong.

Back in the United States, Father Ford returned to the seminary in Weston, Mass., where he had taught for many years, but was received coolly, especially after *Humanae Vitae* came out. Grisez describes him as "dismayed but not surprised" by dissent from the encyclical on the part of many academics and some bishops. Retiring from teaching, he spent his last years doing pastoral work and died Jan. 14, 1989, at the age of 86.

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Benefit (sidebar)

"Certain official documents of the Pontifical Commission on Population, Family and Birth-rate are published here [<http://osv.com/hjcyaA>] without permission under the limitation of copyright called fair use, inasmuch as the documents on which [Jesuit Father John C.] Ford and [Germain] Grisez collaborated could not be accurately understood and fairly evaluated without the otherwise unavailable

commission documents to which they were responding.

“In 2011, Grisez judged that he was no longer bound to keep these documents secret for two reasons: (1) he never undertook to keep them secret; and (2) after more than 44 years, the publication of these documents is hardly likely to harm the Church and may well benefit her.”

— Germain Grisez’s explanation of the release of commission documents