

## "Humanae Vitae": The True Story of its Gestation

An authoritative member of the commission that prepared the controversial encyclical reveals new details about the event - and debunks a myth

by Sandro Magister

ROMA - "Teologia" is the scholarly journal of the theological faculty of Milan and northern Italy. It has a very small and elite readership. But its latest edition, dated March 2003, presents on pages 72-98 an essay that distinguishes itself from all the others. One can gather as much from the opening lines: "This is not a theological discussion. It is, in the first place, an experiential account." The title is "A Discussion of Birth Control: Personal Experiences and Reflections."

The author is Bernardo Colombo (in the photo), 84, professor emeritus of demography at the University of Padua, the brother of Carlo Colombo, who lived from 1909-1991, a bishop and trusted theologian of Paul VI during the period of the Second Vatican Council.

Like his brother, Bernardo Colombo was a "peritus" (consultant) at the council. He took part in the elaboration of the constitution "Gaudium et Spes." But he mainly worked intensively for the Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, the Family, and Birth, the commission that Paul VI charged to prepare the encyclical "Humanae Vitae," on birth control, which was published in 1968.

"Humanae Vitae," as is well known, was immediately an object of debate and dissent. Its "No" to the birth control pill was contrasted with the "Yes" pronounced by the majority of the members of the preparatory committee. The views of the commission were supposed to have remained secret, but in April of 1967 one of its documents favorable toward "The Pill" was published simultaneously in France, by the newspaper "le Monde"; in Great Britain, by "The Tablet"; and in the United States, by the "National Catholic Reporter." It was written that, within the commission, there were 70 members in favor of birth control and only 4 against. But in his account of the events in the most recent edition of "Teologia," Bernardo Colombo does not hesitate to dismantle this verdict as "a false charge used by the most obstinate and by the most gullible, who were not infrequently the same persons."

But let's take things in order. Colombo first establishes that, until now, a trustworthy version of the events has been lacking. He recounts the growing interest of the leadership of the Church in the question of births, beginning in the early '50's. He relates his contributions to the preparation and unfolding of the council. He gives an account of the creation of the commission. He cites the moral theologians who influenced the work: the Dominican Henri de Riedmatten, the secretary of the commission; the Jesuit Stanislas de Lestapis; the Redemptorist Bernhard Häring; and the Canon Pierre de Locht.

The commission began its work while the council was still in progress. In this regard, Colombo cites an episode in the drafting of "Gaudium et Spes." He heard two theologians who had been charged with reordering a paragraph about birth control say: "We've inserted a few little words that will change

things, and the council Fathers won't even realize it." Colombo comments: "I took this statement like a blow to the stomach. I was accustomed to the rigor of scientific research, and I thought this way of doing things was intellectually dishonest."

The commission used individual, open voting. Of the first vote on the legitimacy of the pill, in June of 1964, Colombo relates:

"I had noted the expression and motivation of all the voters. I formed from this a nuanced perspective that went beyond what was represented in the report [of the secretary of the commission]. A clear-cut majority, both of the theologians and of the lay members, shared the judgment of the illegitimacy [of artificial birth control]. But they were non-committal positions that could be construed as 'placet iuxta modum' ('Yes, with reservations), or rather, if one wishes, as 'non placet iuxta modum' ('No, with reservations')."

The commission was extended with more frequent meetings. The members worked in groups: theologians, a third of the total; demographers, sociologists, and economists; doctors and psychologists. But a group of cardinals and archbishops was asked to present the proposals to the pope. The president of this group was Cardinal Ottaviani, and the vice-presidents were the Cardinals Heenan and Döpfner.

The experts, about forty of them, met in full session for the last time in June of 1966. Two theologians expounded the positions of the minority, against any change in doctrine, and of the majority, who were in favor of change. Then came the discussion. Colombo writes:

"I saw that the reformers were having difficulty in defining the practical criteria [by which one could choose to use birth control]. When I heard an eminent theologian define these in terms of the efficacy, cost, etc., of a method of contraception, I lost all patience. It didn't help when another spoke of the mutual understanding between the spouses, which the former had ignored. Oh, please!"

When it came time to vote, Colombo continues, "I noted that, among both the great majority and the minority, fewer than ten persons had taken what I would call a moderate position. I also noted and fixed in my memory that, a few hours after they had voted with the majority, a theologian and a layman confided their reservations to me."

During the course of the work, "very few" members of the commission, Colombo continues, "changed their original convictions for that of the majority. In general, it struck me that most of the theologians had arrived with prefabricated positions. [...] Among both the theologians and the laymen, there were very few with any extensive, direct experience with couples and an understanding of their problems. Most of them brought forth positions that had been matured through abstract thinking."

When, in April of 1967, the so-called "majority report" was released, Colombo remembers having felt "deeply offended and disgusted." The document was only "one of twelve reports presented to the Holy Father." As for those responsible for the leaking of the document to the press:

"We know that this initiative came from the Dutch Documentation Center. The Canon de Locht writes of a well-organized campaign. No, my dear Canon, I see in it a campaign organized with malice, and I don't remember that as being one of the Christian virtues. [...] I felt deeply that those people could teach me nothing in regard to moral behavior. [...] It occurred to me to compare their seriousness with that of the members of the central committee of the Italian Communist Party," who are famous for keeping secret things that are known to "well over a hundred persons."

Colombo concludes his account with some "reflections on current affairs":

"The growth of world population levels has slowed. Noting this, some have said that 'The Church was right': in essence, demographic problems are resolved with time and not by impairing the moral conduct that the Church sees as acceptable. These are foolish opinions. They do not take into account the fact that this slowing did not come like manna from heaven, but was to a great extent caused by the extension of contraceptive practices contrary to Church teaching into developing countries."

Colombo highlights the importance of a speech made by John Paul II on November 22, 1992, at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, "in which, for the first time, a pontiff spoke explicitly about the limitation of births." The pope affirmed:

"The public authorities should promulgate norms aimed toward reconciling the limitation of births with respect for free, personal responsibility."

The regulation of births and freedom - these two terms synthesize the line of the Church. The regulation of births, Colombo writes, is "an inevitable consequence of the dominion that man has acquired, and will presumably be extended over illness and death. Any other course would bring intolerable results, bordering on the absurd, within a few centuries. [...] In essence, man must unfortunately renounce to a great extent his capacity for procreation."

As for freedom, "the Holy Father also spoke about 'the exercise of responsible motherhood and fatherhood.' [...] But for there to be responsibility, there must be freedom of action. [...] In particular, it is extremely important that the state protect the reasonable exercise of this right for all."