

Confessions of a birth control commission Catholic - lay member of Vatican II commission

by Patty Crowley

Twenty-five years ago my husband, Pat, and I received a phone call in the middle of the night. A reporter asked what comment we wanted to make on the pope's new encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. Four years, before that call, Nov. 24, 1964, Pat and I had received a letter from Pope Paul VI inviting us to be part of a special study group on population and birth control, a commission originally initiated by Pope John XXIII in 1963 and now being expanded by his successor.

We wondered if there were some doubt about the church's teaching on birth control. We had been married since 1937. At the beginning of our marriage, even the rhythm method of birth control was forbidden. We wondered why we were asked to participate. Our qualifications were 1. that we were married, and 2. that we were involved in the Christian Family Movement. This was a lay movement of couples meeting regularly in small groups with a program of looking at our lives through the gospel message and an emphasis on social justice action.

These meetings looked at the family as it is influenced by political, economic, international, national and social life. "Observe, judge and act" was our creed. We decided it was most appropriate that a married couple from a lay movement of thousands of couples should participate in the Vatican's ponderings over this matter.

We arrived at the Spanish College in Rome only to find we were to be lodged in separate facilities. Pat would stay at the college with the men. With the other six women on the 55-member commission, I would go to a convent a few miles away. We didn't like it but being docile we made no fuss. We later remarked, "This is one way to solve the problem of birth control."

We were asked not to talk with the press between meetings. We respected this request with one exception: We did mention our separate living quarters to the press. That item made *Paris Match* and the *Ladies Home Journal* and gained apartments for the three couples for the subsequent meetings.

Much expert testimony was recorded during these meetings. The commission consisted of physicians, theologians, philosophers, demographers, psychologists, zoologists, economists, bishops and cardinals. The two other couples were physicians and had rhythm clinics in France and Canada. Neither Pat nor I fit into any of these categories.

So what was our role? We were to prepare a questionnaire to send to married couples asking their opinions on the rhythm method. The University of Notre Dame sociology department prepared the format for us. We sent the questionnaire to thousands of Catholic Family Movement couples around the world and to the mailing list of *St. Anthony Messenger*. This audience was expected to be faithful to church teachings by not practicing birth control.

To our amazement, we received hundreds of letters, mostly telling of difficulties with the rhythm method. The stories were heartrending. Our conclusion was that God could not expect couples to have six to 12 children with such hardship. These letters were bound and given to the Holy Father. Heaven knows where they are now! Our copies are at the archives at Notre Dame University.

Fr. Bernard Haring told us that these letters had a tremendous influence on the thinking of the theologians.

The theologians met separately to review the data. Ninety percent of them concluded that birth control was not intrinsically evil and that the document *Casti Conubii* could be changed. This recommendation was reviewed by the entire commission and 90 percent were in full agreement. A majority document was presented to the pope reflecting this opinion. We left the last meeting thinking that a document presenting love and marriage in a very positive manner would come from Rome.

For two years the world waited. It was a difficult time for us. We had spent a great deal of time away from our family and had worked hard to seek the viewpoint of ordinary Catholic couples. Pat and I never heard from Rome after we left Rome following the commission's last session.

Since then, no priest has ever talked to us about our experience and the process we went through during our two years on the commission. We felt isolated and could not have made it without each other. We had gone to Rome because we were invited. Based on our study, we had completely turned around in our opinion and, in the end, had concurred with the majority document that was given to the pope by the commission.

Then in 1968 without any warning we received that phone call, a voice in the middle of the night asking what we thought of *Humanae Vitae*. Pat and I could not believe it.

Now, 25 years later, I feel betrayed by the church. The pope continually states that birth control is evil, yet I know that couples must be practicing birth control. One never hears from the pulpit that birth control is intrinsically evil and should not be practiced. Is the church hypocritical?

If, as in the majority opinion of the commission, birth control is not intrinsically evil, and if it is clear that the majority of Catholics are practicing some form of birth control, how can the official church continue to uphold de statements of *Humanae Vitae*?

I long for a church that is honest about its teachings, that admits its errors and faces the effects of rigidity with openness. One impact of *Humanae Vitae*'s teaching has been a credibility gap between the church and young and not-so-young couples.

I continue to claim my right to be part of the church for I believe that it is all of us who are the church. As a result of this experience, I am saddened and do not trust the church's search for truth.

I only hope that within the lifetime of my children and grandchildren the church will admit its error in this regard. It took centuries for the church to accept Galileo. May it only be decades for the commission.