

The Catholic Church's Official and Non-official Teaching on Birth Control
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What seems to have become the central question in the Roman Catholic Church under Pope Francis is whether the church's teaching can change. For much of the world this question is a strange one. Why would anyone or any institution not change as situations change? Part of the problem is the meaning of "teaching" which is obscured in the Catholic Church by the term doctrine. The church has some teachings or doctrines that were set in its early history, core beliefs about God, Jesus as the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. No one is proposing that the apostles' creed is not up for revision.

There are other teachings in the form of rules that have been laid down by the church and for the church. These teachings admit of some change; for example, the teaching that excludes from Communion a Catholic who is remarried without an annulment. However, the main concern about change is moral doctrines or teachings that pertain to human behavior. Moral teachings have to change as human history changes. If a moral teaching embodies a principle with a claim to universality, then change should not contradict such a principle but without change the particular teaching would eventually be wrong or irrelevant.

Pope Francis has obviously introduced changes in the Catholic Church. But intentionally or not he has been ambiguous about the nature of many of those changes. One way in which he proposes change is to distinguish between pastoral practice and "doctrine." But to change pastoral practice is a change of doctrine or teaching. Perhaps some underlying principle can be said to remain unchanged. However, we are then talking about different kinds of change in teaching, not whether teaching can change. If the church's moral teaching is to be helpful to anyone it has to deal in specifics rather than only in universal principles. A principle such as "respect all persons" becomes moral teaching as it exists in particular situations, for example, in a condemnation of state executions. A principle is not a rule, a law, or a precept that can just logically be applied to an individual case. A morally good action depends upon a combination of moral principle, good intention, and a knowledge of ever-changing situations.

A related way in which church officials try to maintain the unchangeableness of church teaching is by distinguishing between church doctrine and the ability of people to observe the doctrine. The teaching is imagined to exist in an objective realm and it specifies what is right. Some members, whether or not it is their fault, do not live according to one of the church's moral doctrines. There are cases where such a distinction makes sense. Everyone knows that drunkenness is wrong; some people on occasion drink too much; other people may be alcoholics. Thus, some people fail to live up to the teaching on sobriety; for the people who suffer from an addiction, compassion and mercy may be called for. The teaching on sobriety remains unchanged.

On other matters, however, the church's official teaching may be what needs changing. Official teaching of the church is not based on poll numbers or majority rule, but if a great number of loyal Catholics find a particular teaching to be simply wrong, perhaps it is wrong. They are not disagreeing with a universal moral principle; members of the church are trying to teach church officials that they are mistaken about the situations in which the principle is embodied.

Take the most obvious example: how to control birth. In the 1930s, the Catholic Church accepted the need for birth control. An important principle at stake was the integrity of sexual life. However, a lack of experience and a cramped imagination led church officials to a teaching that the only way to control birth is by "natural family planning."

Some restriction on the methods was understandable. In today's society it is sometimes not admitted that sex and violence are closely related and that humans always have some difficulty in integrating sex into a healthy human life. Forms of birth control that would do violence to the body would be immoral. But that does not mean that birth can and should be controlled only by abstinence or by a married couple counting days on the calendar. During the past century the world has been coming to recognize that men and women alone or in combinations engage in a great variety of sexual practices. Violence will always be a danger but sexual expressions that are expressive of love or simply one of life's pleasures should be celebrated.

Other animals seem programmed by nature to have sex for the purpose of offspring. For humans, the ideal is not natural sex but personal sex, the use of the sexual faculty for a variety of good reasons. What is unnatural or violent should indeed draw protest and restrictions. Young people need some guidance in how to integrate sex into a healthy human life but most of them are not getting much help. Left to themselves while surrounded with advertising and entertainments that promote sex for economic and exploitive reasons, young people make mistakes, sometimes disastrous mistakes. The control of birth is not the only help they need but it is an indispensable part of any young person's education today.

The Catholic Church could have taken a big step by simply approving the birth control pill in 1960. Church officials might have expressed a reservation about the safety of the pill and called for more research to be sure that violence was not done to women's bodies in the use of this birth control device. And in fact there was a strong reaction against the pill in the 1970s and problems with its effect on women's bodies. By that time, however, church officials had removed themselves from the conversation.

It would have been awkward for Pope Paul VI in his 1968 encyclical, *Humani Vitae*, to admit the need for change. But it is now immeasurably more difficult and the bishops do not seem able to even admit the problem. Pope Francis is willing to acknowledge some difficulty around the edges and has even received praise for some of his remarks. The expectation may be that he will soon go further but that is unlikely. He said in Africa that the Zika epidemic might make contraceptives acceptable because they are "not an absolute evil." That is a painfully inadequate reference to the moral necessity of birth control, especially in poor countries.

When asked about *Humani Vitae*, Pope Francis said that the issue is not changing the teaching but coming to a deeper appreciation of the encyclical. His creative reading of *Humani Vitae* is a way in which Catholic Church officials try to get around the need for a change of doctrine. Even the most conservative bishops today admit to what in the nineteenth century was a contentious idea: the development of doctrine. Of course, development is a kind of change. But if one examines what is acknowledged when bishops talk about a development of doctrine, it is actually not a change of doctrine but a change in our understanding of the doctrine. The truth was always there but it took time for our understanding to catch up. That may well be true on some matters but in the case of the pope's disastrous encyclical, the whole world understood what he meant to say and most of the church refused to accept the teaching. After fifty years of standing by this teaching the bishops have to admit the need for some serious readjusting, that is, a change of teaching.

It is almost unthinkable that a pope or the bishops will say: Sorry, we made a mistake. Realistically, they might begin going in the right direction. They could stop speaking negatively about birth control and stop opposing the availability of birth control devices. In recent years, the U.S. bishops aligned themselves with the political right-wing in opposing health care insurance that includes birth control devices. If the bishops are so concerned about abortion, why not support the surest means for reducing abortions. According to the recent study by the World Health Organization, abortion rates have been steadily falling in the Western world. Whether abortion is legal or illegal in a country has little influence on the rate. The most significant factor is that eighty percent of women who have abortions do not have access to adequate birth control.

The bishops could begin to speak in a positive way about "responsible birth control" while leaving the interpretation of that phrase to a church member's conscience. At the beginning of Pope Francis's *Amor Laetitia*, he states an obvious but startling truth: "Not all doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by the intervention of the Magisterium (= bishops)." The non-official members of the Catholic Church have resolved the issue of birth control; it is now the bishops' job to catch up with that teaching.