

Paul VI And The Birth Control Commission

The threat of population explosion is fast becoming one of our most acute problems. Quite expectedly the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is once again called to play the villain's role in what promises to be a noisy debate. For the *demographic explosion* is the real favourite pretext for affirming the legitimacy of contraceptive method.

While this is to be expected, it came as a surprise to us to read in one of our metropolitan dailies about a priest unearthing what we thought an already obsolete objection against the Catholic position on birth regulation. We are referring to the now-defunct Birth Control Commission and Paul VI. It is contended that Pope Paul VI had acted against the advice of his own Commission, and that this was unreasonable. Being so, it is argued that we should not give it too much value and a lesser assent bordering on an outright rejection.

Not everyone can view this attitude with equanimity. And we would like to believe that there was a serious failure to grasp the real nature and function of this Commission on Birth Control.

The Birth Control Commission was instituted by Pope John XXIII, March 1963 and initially it had six members,—three laymen and three clergymen. But by October 1964 it counted with sixty members. The Holy Father granted an audience to the Commission members, mostly laymen on March 25, 1965, and called them members of the "*Commissione di studio sui problemi della popolazione, della famiglia, et della natalita.*" On March 7, 1966, fifteen new members were appointed increasing the Commission membership up to seventy-five. Of the fifteen new members, seven were Cardinals and nine bishops (residential). As stated in *Humanae Vitae*, n. 5, the Commission had as its scope "the gathering of opinions on the new questions regarding conjugal life, and in particular, on the regulation of births, and of furnishing opportune elements of information so that the Magisterium could give an adequate reply to the expectation not only of the faithful, but also of world opinion." There is no ground for the *misreading* and *misunderstanding* of the pur-

pose of the commission: "so that when it had completed its task, the Supreme Pontiff might give his decision." ("Gaudium et Spes", footnote n. 14).

The Commission did its work well: "the majority of the Commission concluded that the weight of evidence indicated that the question of whether or not contraception was intrinsically evil was **open**, whereas the minority still maintained that contraception was intrinsically evil." This was the substance of the report of Dr. John Marshall, who was a member of the Commission since its beginning. Nobody came to the conclusion that it was intrinsically good. It is clear then that if there was any "advice" by the Commission against which Pope Paul acted, he certainly did not act against their conclusion.

Even supposing for the sake of argument that the Pope did act against the conclusion of the majority, there is no reason to find fault with the Pope for this. The Commission's task was to furnish information and to supply materials for forming a judgment; that is what it has done. It pertains to the Pope, and only to the Pope, to decide and that is what the Pope had done. He passed judgment in line with conciliar teaching, after having consulted a very large number of competent and qualified individuals and organizations, as the Encyclical affirms. Towards all of them Paul VI has displayed the greatest respect, verging almost on scrupulosity.

But this respect could not deprive him of the authority that belongs to him alone nor could it ease the burden of that responsibility that falls upon him as Supreme Pastor of the Church. Mindful of his apostolic responsibility proper and special to him, aware of the requirements in conscience of his unique teaching office in this Church and in the world, Paul V has heard all sides and spoke not as a teacher among many teachers but as the Supreme Teacher, under God, of the flock committed to him in Peter by Christ.

Failure to take cognizance of these facts surrounding the now defunct Birth Control Commission seems to us to condemn oneself to the fatal mistake of misreading the contribution of those bishops, priests and laymen who served in the commission and to contradict the theological premises on which they loyally, competently and sometimes sacrificially served.