Opinion
Letters to the Editor

by NCR Staff

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Controversy over the Pontifical Academy for Life's book that challenges church teaching on contraception shows why conservative Catholics are so concerned about this issue, say ethicists Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler. And political scientist Ryan Burge says that according to a recent survey, Catholics' adherence to the church's teaching seems to depend in part on how often the person attends Mass. Following are letters to the editor responding to both commentaries. The letters have been edited for length and clarity.

On Feb. 6, my thought on Catholic sexual ethics was mentioned in this article on *Humanae Vitae* signed by Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman. They took a cue from this interview but to address as scholars themes that I addressed as a scholar at this conference. The result was an imbalance between their developed arguments and my interview quotes. There are many aspects that I would like to clarify in this regard but the main one is perhaps of method and style.

Your authors present the debate as if there were enemies on one side and friends on the other and as if their enemies were against love and the true teaching of the church. Throughout the first part of the article the main thesis is that *Humanae Vitae* could be reformed because it is not in line with the ordinary and universal magisterium, of which they seem to appear as the defenders. Pope Paul VI did not listen to the opinion of the papal commission, including that of nine bishops in it.



Yet, Paul VI explicitly rejects the opinion "because certain approaches and criteria … were at variance with the moral doctrine on marriage constantly taught by the magisterium of the Church" (*Humanae Vitae*, 6) — and Pope John Paul II (who is not even mentioned by the authors) confirms *Humanae Vitae*'s teaching in *Veritatis Splendor*. Clearly, those nine bishops do not represent the magisterium better than these two popes and their encyclicals.

Paul VI bases all his reasoning on the authentic sense of God's and human love (*Humanae Vitae*, 7-9), which characterized the entire life and teaching of John Paul II. Making believe that people like Paul VI and John Paul II are just legalists unable to understand the beauty and demands of love is not fair and prevents honest and constructive dialogue in the church. I welcome a dialogue, even a strong one, with anyone who thinks differently, but I cannot accept the rhetoric of creating non-existent contrasts between presumed good guys and presumed bad guys, especially when popes of that human and ethical stature appear among the bad guys.

The method used by the authors is biased because they ridicule opposing opinions — even pointing them out as "disingenuous" or "unjustifiable" — and present themselves as defenders of something they instead want to demolish. They recognize at the end "that once the church recognizes the flaws in *Humanae Vitae*'s foundational principle, the entire edifice of official Catholic sexual teaching crumbles." They don't mention that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops condemned their book on sexual morality because they "insist that the moral theology of the Catholic tradition dealing with sexual matters is now as a whole obsolete and inadequate." In the name of the magisterium, they favor nine bishops

against Paul VI, but what about all U.S. bishops?

I don't care here about the bishops' condemnation as such. All I care about is that in honest discussions, especially between scholars, one presents one's own positions unambiguously, trying to fully understand those of others.

FULVIO DI BLASI
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It has been my understanding for quite a long time that nearly 80% of the people in the pews do not adhere to one or more church teachings and are therefore not "four-square" with the church. This might be an inflated number or conservative depending upon to whom you speak, however the fact of the matter is most Catholics do not follow all the teachings of the church.

The differences might be demographic and are likely related to age as much as any other criterion. Those of us old enough to remember Pope Paul VI's rejection of the findings of his own special committee to examine the issue of contraception felt that was a rejection of the responsibility and the maturity of Catholic couples to plan the size of their own families. The commission recommended allowing Catholic couples to use artificial contraception as part of their family planning and their recommendations were embraced by the vast majority of the Catholic population. That rejection by the pope demonstrated a continuation of the paternalistic condescension many Catholics felt from our clerics for far too long.

Contraception, in the view of Ryan Burge, is certainly one of the factors in the loss of attendance. However, the rejection of other teachings may also contribute to that decline. Most Americans accept abortion with reasonable limits and recognize the rights of agency and privacy from which all people in our country benefit. We also recognize that abortion is the wrong choice and assistance for women in troubled circumstances is what we would expect from our church leaders. However, the politicization of this issue and the fealty of many outspoken clerics to one political party over this issue is also separating many of the faithful from our ecclesiastic leaders.

Just as we discern from the media we engage whether or not we subscribe to what they are discussing, so to we are either engaged or turned off from a continual

exposure to views from our church leaders. No one can expect the faithful to voluntarily submit themselves to a continual exposure to views with which they disagree, be they social or political. Just as we decide not to listen to certain government leaders or hear their views reflected in the news media we are just as inclined to seek views from our church leaders which resonate with our own lived experiences. The tendency of many clerics to assume they have a captive audience is one of their fundamental failings and one which is being manifest in the consolidation of parishes and the inability to staff the parishes that remain.

CHARLES A. LE GUERN
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Ryan Burge's article hits the nail on the head. As long as celibate males are making these rules, there seems little hope that the faithful will change their opinions. There are probably many among us the result of the rhythm method.

JANE FRANCISCO
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Catholic teaching on sexuality is driving people away from the pews. The magisterium and the laity fundamentally disagree about what sexuality is for and what sex means. The gulf that exists between Catholic teaching on sex/sexuality and the average lay Catholic's experience of sex/sexuality is enormous.

I don't know how many members of the hierarchy fathom how completely out of touch with reason such teachings appear to be. How many of us who want to be faithful have found ourselves confessing the same supposed sins each and every week because we do not lead the abnormal sexual life that the magisterium demands of us?

I'd suggest that nothing erodes the socio-cultural relevancy of Catholicism as much as her sexual doctrines. Add to that the exposure of clerical sexual abuse, when we

discovered that the same people warning us about "living in sin" were not only covering up but even enabling evil, sexually degenerate behavior, and in some cases were perpetuators themselves? What impression does that leave us with?

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