Opinion

NCR Voices



NCR staff are pictured inside the company's headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri, in this photo from 1968, the year *Humanae Vitae* was issued by Pope Paul VI. The encyclical called the use of artificial birth control "intrinsically wrong." NCR's first issue appeared in October 1964, amid the Second Vatican Council. (Jack Kenward)



by James V. Grimaldi

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Today, Oct. 28, is our 60th birthday. To celebrate six decades as the independent voice for and about Catholics, we are launching a new feature republishing articles from our past.

The following article — about what priests should say to women who confess using the birth control pill — appeared on our very first front page on Oct. 28, 1964. It is a fascinating moment in time, written four years before *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical issued by Pope Paul VI that called the use of artificial birth control "intrinsically wrong."



(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Robert Olmstead, the first reporter hired by the newly born National Catholic Reporter, interviewed Jesuit Fr. John L. Thomas, a noted sociologist at St. Louis University who went on to a long career in social science.

Olmstead, who also had worked for The Associated Press and Chicago Sun-Times, died in 2013. Thomas died in 1991.

Not long after this article was published, NCR received a visit from Bishop Charles Helmsing of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri. Helmsing, who had initially given his blessing for NCR's creation, had become dismayed, expressing his "deep concerns" about the new publication's stories and editorials about birth control and celibacy, and "its general critical treatment of institutional authority," according to a new history of NCR.

So you see, from its inception, NCR has always been on the leading edge, tackling the most controversial and important issues for Catholics — and has been a thorn in the side of the bishops.

Beginning today, we plan to publish articles from our history throughout our anniversary year. Let us know what you think, or what articles you would like to read by emailing me at ncr_editor@ncronline.org with the subject line "60th Anniversary."

Confessors 'pinned to the wall' by pill question, says Jesuit expert

By Robert Olmstead

THE CONFESSOR whose penitent asks if she can use birth control pills "is in a rough spot," says the Rev. John L. Thomas, Jesuit sociologist. Until the Vatican Council or the Holy See acts, he said, a priest can neither tell anyone to use the pill nor forbid anyone whose conscience says she may and should use it.

When a priest "is pinned to the wall in the confessional," as one priest put it, the confessor is up against a dilemma. Father Thorns explained it this way:

— Because Paul VI on June 23 declared that until the Church speaks further nobody is to speak in terms different from the norms laid down by Pius XII, a confessor cannot advise anyone to use the pill. Pius XII in 1958 condemned use of the anovulant pill as a contraceptive.

— But because a number of Catholic theologians show considerable doubt on the morality of birth control pills, a confessor cannot forbid anyone who says his own conscience tells him it is all right, Father Thomas said.

"If the Church refuses to come to terms with this thing, it will be making a very serious mistake," Father Thomas said. By coming to terms, he said he meant either making a pronouncement in the Vatican Council or having the council set up a commission to come to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

Father Thomas, who has given special attention to the moral problems of marriage, gave his views by telephone from St. Louis, where he is a member of the Institute of Social Order at St. Louis university. Among his books are several dealing with marriage questions.

A VITAL QUESTION in current debate on the pill is whether it works mostly by preventing production of the egg in the female, or mostly by preventing an already fertilized egg from attaching itself to the inner wall of the womb for continued development.

Anti-pill moralists say that such a loss of a fertilized egg constitutes abortion, and that latest scientific findings show this happens so often that debate on the question is over: The pill is immoral.

Father Thomas denies the debate is over. "Oh, no," he said, "there is no end to the discussion. It's still very much of an open question."

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The medical picture of the effects of the pill "is still a highly questionable affair. There is no doubt that a certain percentage of women who use the pill do have this abortive effect. But there is little agreement on the frequency of this effect.

"I rather think that Enovid (one leading birth control pill), for instance, stops ovulation in the majority of cases," he said.

WHAT EFFECT does this have on the theological argument?

"If a moralist would say it is moral to use the pill because it prevents ovulation, I think he could say that the present percentage of known abortions would be a side, or unintended, effect, and therefore would be no serious moral problem."

Father Thomas said the discussion of the morality of the pill is complicated by the knotty problem of whether or not a newly fertilized egg is a human being, and if not,

at what stage it becomes a human being. The problem has been intensified by recent discoveries that there are "a great many abortions in the average woman, when the fertilized egg is sloughed off," he said.

The medical exploration into the effects of the many birth control pills is so complex, Father Thomas said, that even the gynecologist or obstetrician "is simply out of his field" discussing the matter. The research which will clarify the question is being done by biochemists and endocrinologists.

Meanwhile, the confessor remains in that rough spot. "We're waiting for something to happen," said Father Thomas.

This story appears in the **NCR at 60 years** feature series. View the full series.
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