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Should Francis take on birth control?

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Foremost among the issues that concern Pope Francis is the widespread poverty that makes life unbearable for millions. During his general audience on June 5 (United Nations World Environment Day), he said, "If in so many parts of the world there are children who have nothing to eat, that's not news; it seems normal. It cannot be this way!" Catholics, he insisted, have a duty to do all they can to alleviate this situation.

It seems to me that Francis could do something himself by considering a modification of the church's stand on birth control. The church's concern about high infant mortality and high maternal death rates in many countries is mocked by the church's critics, since it forbids any form of artificial contraception and it remains unwilling to even discuss the possibility of change.

I'm not suggesting the pope announce he is rescinding the church's position as dictated by Pope Paul VI in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Such a move at this time could be a catastrophe. Rather, I'd like to encourage this humble new pontiff to study (or re-study) the document that was created some 45 years ago by the Papal Birth Control Commission after six years of work in the 1960s by a body of priests, bishops and experts in sociology, psychology, economics, medicine and even a few lay couples, all appointed by Pope John XXIII or Pope Paul.

I recently re-read that document, titled *Responsible Parenthood* -- better known as the Majority Report of the Birth Control Commission -- and I couldn't help noting how the language of the document so resembled the calm, non-argumentative, pastoral style of the current pope.

Responsible Parenthood was approved by a 52-4 vote of the commission itself and endorsed almost immediately by a majority of 15 bishops and cardinals summoned by Pope Paul. That this report did not become the official teaching of the church was due to the efforts of the four who voted against it and who

created a minority report. They argued that any change on the church's stand would cause widespread scandal; after two years they succeeded in getting the pope to agree with them. Hence, *Humanae Vitae*.

Meanwhile, *Responsible Parenthood* has been gathering dust as perhaps the most under-discussed papal document of the 20th century. The commission members were careful not to contradict previous statements about birth control, only to state that times and conditions have changed. And these make a big difference that the church must recognize.

Here are a few excerpts:

"The facts which throw light on today's world suggest that it is not to contradict the genuine sense of previous doctrinal condemnations if we speak of the regulation of conception using means human and decent, ordered toward favoring fecundity in the totality of married life and toward the realization of authentic values of a fruitful matrimonial community."

The morality of sexual acts between married people takes its meaning from the ordering of their actions in a fruitful married life, that is one which is practiced with responsible, generous and prudent parenthood. It does not then depend on the direct fecundity of each and every particular act. For a conscience correctly formed, a willingness to raise a family with full acceptance of the various human and Christian responsibilities is altogether distinguished from a mentality and way of married life which in its totality is egotistically and irrationally opposed to fruitfulness.

The true opposition is not to be sought between some material conformity to the physiological processes of nature and some artificial intervention. For it is natural to man to use his skill in order to put under human control what is given by physical nature. The opposition is really to be sought between one way of acting which is contraceptive and opposed to fruitfulness and another way which is in an ordered relationship to responsible fruitfulness.

Toward the end of the report, the majority proposed a way to move forward: It seems very necessary to establish some pontifical institute or secretariat for the study of the sciences connected with married life. In this commission there could be continual collaboration in open dialogue among experts competent in various areas. It would be [important] for this institute to study how the doctrine of matrimony should be applied to different parts of the world.

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Clearly, the Papal Birth Control Commission was ahead of its time. Now we have a pope who in so many ways is ahead of the times. I hope he would carefully consider some of the bold ideas that stirred the church in the 1960s and act upon them.

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