

Published: Catholic World Report, December 13, 2019

## **Can't-Say-No-to-Anything: Did a Theological Environment Influence Mr. McCarrick?**

By John F. Kippley

The investigation of how the former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick was promoted up to the level he enjoyed before his misdeeds became public knowledge is, I suppose, necessary and may yield helpful results. However, besides the issue of “Who knew what and promoted him?” there’s another crucial issue. How could this man who was ordained in 1958 think it was permissible to give his assent to such actions and then to carry them out? I write with two assumptions. First, I assume that he did not tell himself, “I know this is a mortal sin but I am going to do it anyway.” Second, I assume that he somehow rationalized his actions, perhaps thinking something like this: “I know this was once considered evil but today we have a new approach in which these things are solely dependent upon one’s intentions, and I intend no harm.” Since I have not seen anything of this nature mentioned as part of the investigation, I will offer my speculation based partially on personal experience.

Theodore E. McCormick was born July 7, 1930, and I was born four months later on November 6. His birthday was approximately one month before the Church of England issued its Lambeth statement that broke with 19 centuries of Traditional teaching and accepted marital contraception. I was born about three months after Lambeth and only eight weeks before Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, to respond to the Lambeth Statement and to reaffirm traditional teaching against marital contraception. After five years in the seminary including a year of theology, my spiritual director agreed in 1953 that I did not have a vocation. My classmates were ordained in 1956; Theodore McCormick was ordained in 1958. After those early similarities, our paths seem to have little in common.

With regard to sexuality, I remember that our seminary Rule Book warned against forming “particular friendships.” At the time I thought that meant to avoid forming cliques; I could not imagine that young men would have a sexual attraction to each other. In the Fall of 1956, I was looking for an apartment to share in New York. In one visit, the two men asked me a few questions and then, “Are you gay?” I had not a clue what they meant, so I told them that I supposed I enjoyed a good party as much as the next guy. They told me they would phone if I was the right person. The call never came.

In 1960, Father McCarrick was only two years into his priesthood when the public marketing of the oral contraceptive commonly called “the Pill” made birth control a subject for newspaper articles and adult dinner conversations. Talk about the Sexual Revolution made it appear as if the sexual-morality ballpark had completely changed. Now it was okay to have sex with the girl next door provided she was taking the Pill. To some with same-sex attraction, sodomy seemed newly acceptable.

In 1968, the priest-led dissent against *Humanae Vitae* led many to think that there was a new sexual-morality ballpark right within the Church. If you looked for priests, bishops, and Catholic theologians giving verbal and written support to *Humanae Vitae*, what would you find? You would find that Cardinal O’Boyle in Baltimore tried to discipline 19 priests who were overtly dissenting—and that exactly zero bishops and cardinals were giving him public support. (When the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars developed its Cardinal O’Boyle Award, it was quickly nicknamed the “Swinging in the Wind” award. Mother Angelica was one of the early awardees, and my wife and I received that award in 1986.)

On November 15, 1968, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops replied to *Humanae Vitae* with a document titled *Human Life in Our Day*. While supportive of the encyclical, it contained one section that was and remains fatally flawed, “Norms of Licit Theological Dissent” (n. 49-54). Even though most of this section qualifies and discourages dissent, the phrase itself, “licit theological dissent” in an official document responding to *Humanae Vitae* is a disaster. Does that phrase appear in any of the encyclicals dealing with labor-management issues? Or in teachings against direct abortion? What if “Norms of licit theological dissent” had appeared in statements against Nazism or slavery? Would not the authors of such documents have been pilloried—and rightly so? It seems to me that the investigation of Mr. McCarrick should also investigate who drafted *Human Life in Our Day* and especially who promoted the section on “licit theological dissent.”

The key subject of dissent is the teaching in sections 12-14 of *Humanae Vitae*. Section 12 affirms the “inseparable connection” between the unitive and procreative meanings of the marriage act. Section 13 expands on that. Section 14 is the chief object of dissent because it responds to the big-picture morality proposed by the pro-contraception report. That was the hypothesis that acts of marital contraception would take their morality from the non-contraceptive marital acts. Pope Paul VI positively rejected that hypothesis with this sentence: “Consequently, it is an error to think that a conjugal act which is deliberately made infecund and so is intrinsically dishonest could be made honest and right by the ensemble of a fecund conjugal life.” The key phrase “intrinsically dishonest” says it all.

To dissent from this teaching logically involves the opinion that there is no intrinsic meaning to the human sexual act, even within marriage, and that logic played out in theological writing. Dissenter Michael E. Valente, then the chairman of the theology department at Seton Hall University, wrote *Sex: The Radical View of a Catholic Theologian* (Bruce 1970), but I have not seen him quoted by other dissenters. Perhaps his lack of prominence may be due to the fact that he pursued the logic of dissent to the acceptance of bestiality. Yes, in his acceptance of subjectivism, he used the example of bestiality to point out the logical consequences of dissent—with which he agreed.

And he was certainly not alone. The March 1971 issue of *Theological Studies* carried my article, “Continued Dissent: Is It Responsible Loyalty?” in which I showed that the decision-making principles of Fr. Charles E. Curran could not say a firm NO to spouse-swapping. No one, including Fr. Curran, accused me of making a straw man.

I think that Theodore E. McCarrick rationalized his actions as being somehow acceptable in the new-morality ballpark. If that is correct, then I hope that the McCarrick investigators will give due consideration to the socio-ecclesial environment in which he lived and operated, and that includes the people and the events which built that culture. I have addressed this previously with a list of 13 socio-ecclesial factors in the May 20 2019 issue of *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* ([hprweb.com/2019/04/the-new-acceptance-of-sodomy/](http://hprweb.com/2019/04/the-new-acceptance-of-sodomy/)).

In his 1994 *Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II*, the now sainted scholar gave us a positive way to think about the human sexual act—as a renewal of the marriage covenant (n.12). This provides an intrinsically honest meaning of the marriage act to contrast with the “intrinsically dishonest” act of marital contraception defined in H.V. 14.

If this is pursued, the McCarrick investigation can both improve the episcopal promotion process and also improve the socio-ecclesial environment in which priests, bishops and theologians live and teach. However, for these benefits to develop, I submit that it is necessary for our bishops to repudiate collectively and individually the big-picture, can’t-say-no-to-anything hypothesis advanced by the pro-contraception party within the Church.

Not long ago Cardinal Timothy Dolan mentioned that he and his fellow American bishops have suffered 50 years of laryngitis regarding *Humanae Vitae*. The time has come for them to use their voices to affirm its teaching, and Pope John Paul II has led the way. Our ecclesial leaders need to teach that the human sexual act is intended by God to be exclusively a marriage act. Further, within marriage it ought to be a renewal of the faith and love of their marriage covenant, for better and for worse, including the sometimes imagined worse of possible pregnancy. The practical living of its teaching includes a sometimes daily cross, but almost no one with an open heart and mind can fail to understand the covenant-renewal meaning of the marriage act.

A huge difference between 1968 and the present is the current almost universal access to the teaching of natural family planning systems. At least one NFP program includes the pattern of breastfeeding that typically postpones the return of postpartum fertility for 14 to 15 months. So effective is contemporary chaste NFP that some in the Church and the NFP movement worry that NFP is being used selfishly or with a contraceptive mentality, but perhaps that's the subject of another article.

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