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New birth control commission papers reveal Vatican's hand

Gerald Slevin | Mar. 23, 2011

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The cover of an English language edition of Pope Paul VI's encyclical 'Humanae Vitae'

ANALYSIS

Germain Grisez, a retired moral philosophy professor who worked as an aide to a member of the papal birth control commission in the 1960s, appears to be trying to revise Vatican history with the revelation of new documents dealing with the workings of the commission.

However, the documents, apparently without intention, reveal how a powerful Vatican official, working closely with Pope Paul VI, privately maintained a close control of the process and results of the commission?s work.

The commission, callyed by Pope John XXIII in 1963 and later working on the aegis of Paul VI, eventually ended its tenure with a report asking that the church?s ban on all forms of artificial birth control be lifted.

Immediately, a second report, objecting to the commission?s final report, was called for by Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and a powerful church conservative at the time.

The commission?s final report was leaked to and published in the *National Catholic Reporter* and appeared in other publications in 1967. A year later, after widespread expectations Paul VI would take the commission?s report to heart, he issued the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, affirming the church's official ban on all forms of artificial contraception.

Grisez? documents, published in an online essay [1] by Jesuit Fr. John Ford, a member of the papal birth control commission, attempts to make the case that the head of the commission, Dominican Fr. Henri de Riedmatten of the Vatican's office of Secretariat of State, placed undue pressure on the members of the commission to approve birth control.

In the documents, Grisez, who was brought to Rome by Ford as an assistant, appears to be endeavoring to win the argument that he and Ford -- who was added to the commission by Paul VI -- lost almost 50 years ago.

Ford and Grisez both arrived late to the commission's deliberations as part, it appears, of Cardinal Ottaviani?s late effort to salvage the church?s traditional teaching on birth control, cast in the encyclical, *Casti Connubii*.

Paul VI and Ottaviani had already in 1965 tried unsuccessfully to reaffirm *Casti Connubi*, explicitly but quietly at Vatican Council II by proposing a last minute amendment to an advanced draft of one of the final council documents. The amendment was, in effect, rejected by council representatives.

The commission members had to have been well aware by 1965 what both Paul VI and Ottaviani wanted as a decision, but the original commission members held their ground. Over several years the original members of the commission had considered and weighed carefully the relevant theological, sociological and psychological evidence.

Based on this, they offered their decision and report to Paul VI as he requested and emphatically recommended to him that he change the Vatican's teachings to permit birth control.

What is most significant in Grisez's recent notes on Ford, perhaps an unattended admission, is not proof of any real manipulation by the chairperson, de Riedmatten, but rather clear evidence of the secret machinations Ottaviani and Paul VI employed in an effort to undercut a decision, carefully arrived at over four years by the papally appointed commission.

Grisez' biographical note includes Ford's own words stating that Paul VI privately told Ford as early as 1966 (two years before the issuance of the encyclical) in very clear terms that Paul VI was not going to change *Casti Connubii*, published in 1930, to permit birth control.

Grisez also describes in detail how Ottaviani, most likely with Paul VI?s blessing, met with Ford and Grisez within just a half hour of de Riedmatten's hand delivering to the pope the commission's final report favoring birth control.

Most significantly, Grisez in this recent biographical note indicated that Ottaviani, at a private meeting just after the last meeting of the commission, asked Ford and him to stay another week or so in Rome to write, in effect, a report (now the so called "minority report") for Pope Paul VI to counter the report de Riedmatten's had just delivered (now the so called "majority report").

It appears that Ottaviani only asked for this when he realized the original papally appointed commission could not be pressured to support *Casti Connubii*'s prohibition of birth control.

While this may not surprise some, it is most noteworthy that Grisez has just given such direct proof of these secret machinations. It provides support for some previous speculations about Ottaviani's and Paul VI?s approach to several major decisions of the Vatican Council, namely, let the 2,500 plus council bishops and the commission members decide whatever they want.

If, however, Paul VI and Ottaviani disagreed with any of these decisions, Ottaviani would just get with the pope after the council bishops and commission members left Rome and undercut the decisions that Ottaviani and the pope opposed.

Grisez was personally involved in the commission's last meetings and his revisionism appears to be part of an effort by some traditionalist Catholics -- often with the Vatican's blessings -- to rewrite elements of the history of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

The commission's final support to change church teachings on birth control remains to this day an unanswered challenge to the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, published in 1968, and largely rejected by lay Catholics and clergy around the world.

While most American and European Catholics eventually appear to have disregarded the encyclical, some followed it and many others suffered pangs of conscience about birth control. More importantly, throughout the world today, in Latin America and Africa, for example, the encyclical still exercises a negative influence.

Most of the story of the commission was initially told in detail in 1985 by Robert Blair Kaiser in a book entitled, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*

. During the sixties Kaiser had been the religion reporter for *TIME* magazine, and then reported for *Newsweek* as well.

By Kaiser?s telling, Pope John XXIII established the commission in 1962 to evaluate the moral implications of certain current reproductive issues, including the new birth control pill. Neither John XXIII nor Paul VI wanted the almost three thousand bishops and other clerics then in Rome for Vatican II to address the birth control issue even though many of these bishops expressed their desire to bring this important and pressing pastoral issue before the Council.

One major reason for both popes' preference for the commission approach seems very clear. Pope Pius XI had in 1930 already issued an encyclical, *Castii Canubii*, which many Catholics considered to be an "infallible" papal teaching. This encyclical had been issued in light of the post-World War I European birth rate decline resulting mainly as a consequence of the millions of young men killed in WWI.

The Vatican was then also concerned about the rise of atheistic Russian Communism. In this encyclical, Pius XI unqualifiedly condemned all forms of artificial birth control.

If the Vatican II bishops then in 1962 were to have considered and reversed the *Casti Conubii* prohibition issued just three decades before, the Council bishops would also, by reversing Pius XI's recent prohibition, have likely destroyed for all time the claim of popes to be infallible -- obviously a very important issue for popes seeking to preserve their spiritual power over the world's Catholic faithful.

This "infallibility doctrine" had only been declared formally at the First Vatican Council a mere sixty years before Pius XI's encyclical.

The original birth control commission had only six members in 1963 including one psychologist, no theologians, no sociologists and no married couples. The German Jesuit Josef Fuchs was added for the second meeting and Patty Crowley and her husband, Patrick, came in for the fourth meeting.

The Crowleys were active in the Catholic Family Movement. The CFM was a worldwide married Catholic couples group that then advocated the "rhythm method" for birth regulation. The rhythm method, relying on a woman's fertility cycle for birth regulation, was not then prohibited by the Vatican.

The commission met in Rome intensely off and on until 1966 under its chairman, de Riedmatten, who eventually delivered to Paul VI in 1966 the commission's final report favoring birth control.

By the time the commission delivered its final report the commission contained 15 bishops and cardinals, with all the other members reduced to the level of *periti*. In the end, the 15 voted in support of the commission's recommendations.

When the commission began in 1963, many of the original members were opposed to any change in *Casti Conubii*'s prohibition of birth control. Over time, this changed.

Especially important in changing commission members' minds was an important survey Patty and Patrick Crowley did of the CFM members. The CFM members in large numbers reported movingly how the rhythm method did not work for them and how it was inhibiting intimacy and hurting their marriages.

These survey results would likely only have surprised clerics who had never been in a long-term, public, monogamous heterosexual relationship.

Eventually, the original commission members became substantially in favor of recommending changing the

Vatican's policy, thereby permitting birth control.

Ottaviani, Paul VI?s s top lieutenant, evidently saw what was coming and tried to head it off with the pope?s support by a late expansion of the commission. This expansion added some known clerical supporters of *Casti Connubii*. One of those added was a prominent U.S. moral theologian, Jesuit Fr. John Ford, who brought with him as an advisor a young professor, Germain Grisez.

Ford died several years ago. Notwithstanding this expansion attempt, the original commission members by and large resisted this papal pressure and eventually endorsed by an overwhelming margin a confidential report in 1966 calling for the permitting birth control.

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[1] http://www.twotlj.org/Ford.html