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At Whom Are The Bishops Angry?

Ken Briggs | Feb. 7, 2012 NCR Today

The flurry of response to the Obama Administration's ruling that Catholic institutions must cover the cost of contraceptives has emphasized the political tensions underlying the conflict but neglects the strains created within the church itself.

Two consequences especially seem evident, if not immediately then in the months and years come.

They both stem from the failure of the birth control encyclical to persuade American Catholics that the prohibition made sense, in part because it left them, the ones most involved with the issue, out of the decision.

Has the Vatican been nursing a resentment against American Catholics ever since? I think much evidence suggests this is so. But under the prevailing customs of creeping infallibilism, the encyclical cannot be declared flawed or in need of reconsideration.

Therefore, it seems to me that the Obama ruling has triggered an attempt to chasten dissenting birth control Catholics by refusing to abide by a policy which, in effect, rebukes the overwhelming number of Catholics who use artificial birth control or condone it. Catholic employees, who are probably in the majority in these institutions, would be made to pay the price if the Obama ruling sticks.

The more implicit consequence is that the bishops' position reopens an old wound over the encyclical that decades have largely covered over by benign neglect. Even in a time when aspiring bishops must sign a pledge to support all of the church's sexually-related teachings, I'm guessing that plenty of bishops would rather walk a bed of hot coals than defend the encyclical in public. Yet they must obey and they do.

But bitter memories of the earlier fight remain among the laity. For many it was the turning point in a process of separating themselves from church views and even from the church itself.

Raising this contentious, personal matter of conscience could further alienate those who may have learned to live with a quiet truce.

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