

MORAL THEOLOGY (I)—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: *Humanae Vitae*, 50 Years Later
Convener: Kent J. Lasnoski, Wyoming Catholic College
Moderator: Kent J. Lasnoski, Wyoming Catholic College
Presenters: Maria Morrow, Seton Hall University
David Cloutier, Catholic University of America
Karen Ross, Loyola University Chicago

This well-attended session celebrated the 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's profound, prophetic, and polemical encyclical *Humanae vitae*. The session featured two younger scholars (Maria Morrow and Karen Ross) with a historical and ethnographic approach, respectively, as well as a senior scholar, David Cloutier, who's more experimental, theoretical essay provoked long discussion well-beyond the session's close.

The session opened with Maria Morrow's "Living With (and Growing From) Bad Timing: Penance and *Humanae vitae*." Going beyond the reception history traced by Tentler's well-known *Catholics and Contraception*, Morrow investigates the relationship between an erosion of penitential culture among American Catholics and the near impossibility of *Humanae vitae*'s safe landing on the shores of American Catholic consciences. Her paper's focus centers on the bad-timing of three documents: *Humanae vitae* itself, Paul VI's *Paenitemini*, and the United States bishops' Pastoral Letter on Fast and Abstinence. *Humanae vitae* shocked Catholics from pew to *cathedra*, most of which were expecting ecclesial concession to contraception due to tidal changes at the cultural level. *Paenitemini* and the United States episcopal letter, while attempting to renew and invigorate penitential life, making it more personal, effected exactly the opposite. Catholics felt justified not only in dropping mortifications but also in their flight from the confessional. Morrow makes a follow-up claim as well: "The irony of the American Catholic overall rejection of the Church teaching against artificial contraception was that this decision ultimately assisted in reifying the circumstances that made adhering to the teaching difficult in the first place." Morrow concludes with a convincing portrayal of these circumstances and how a recovery of penitential culture could aid Catholics attempting to follow the Church's teaching on sexual ethics.

Moving in the experimental direction, Cloutier's paper, "*Humanae vitae* and *Amoris Laetitia*: Seeking the Catholic Both/And," raised a challenging question: how can moral theologians (in sexual ethics) hold in one hand "principles" and "prudence"? "Principles" seem to represent Paul VI's *Humanae vitae* approach while "prudence" seems to give us Francis' approach from *Amoris Laetitia*. Cloutier sketches two alternatives for uniting principles and prudence in the following instances: (a) the relationship in HV of the critique of the "contraceptive mentality" to the absolute prohibition against contraception; and (b) the relationship in AL between its vision of marriage and family and the possibility of what appear to be exceptions to the absolute prohibition against adultery. One alternative reading involves developing more seriously the inherently social character of the Church's principles on marriage and family, with the recognition that prudential judgments must correspondingly pay more attention to the social context of particular actions. That is to say, the Church's teaching on marriage should be understood as analogous to the teaching on paying a just wage.

Topic Session: Moral Theology (I)

The other alternative involves greater attention to the task of act description in the context of the larger principled vision, so as to specify more carefully the particular acts to which the exceptionless norms apply. That is to say, the Church's teaching on marriage should be understood to be analogous to the way the norm prohibiting theft involves the overall vision of the universal destination of goods. Cloutier does not adjudicate between these paths but sets them before us and points out the challenges the tradition encounters in taking either approach.

A fitting look into a term developed and deployed over the 50 years since *Humanae vitae* came from Karen Ross and her paper, "*Humanae vitae* Fifty Years Later: Catholic Adolescent Girls and the 'Contraceptive Mentality'." Written in the vein of Donna Freitas' work, *Sex and the Soul*, Karen Ross presented on ethnographic research of an even younger generation of Catholic youth, analyzing their experiences and understandings of "contraceptive mentality" and sexual education more generally. Ross interviewed a sample of 18–25 year-old women from a range of backgrounds in the United States. Her findings orbit three themes: (1) the disconnect between faith and sexuality for Catholic youth; (2) the connection between sexual pedagogies and contraception; and (3) the media as the super-peer of Catholic youth. Ross concluded that "current Catholic sexual pedagogies are not creating an atmosphere that promotes sexual flourishing for Catholic youth—especially young women, and thus are not providing for the common good of human society." On a constructive note, Ross suggested "that the field of Catholic Sexual Ethics reorient the notion of 'contraceptive mentality' in order to facilitate the healthy moral and sexual flourishing of catholic young women," specifically by making the term more expansive.

The half-hour of lively conversation touched all three papers but attended most to exploring Cloutier's two alternative methods of uniting *Amoris Laetitia* and *Humanae vitae*.

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