

The Vatican's Declaration On Procured Abortion . . .

A Charter For Political Action

By WILLIAM H. MARSHNER

Editor's Note: With a few notable exceptions, Catholics in this Country have given little attention to the Vatican's *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith last November. In the following commentary on this landmark document, Mr. Marshner demonstrates that the *Declaration* is more than a moral exhortation against abortion; it is a call for Catholics and all men of goodwill to take the offensive against all those who seek to institutionalize—in the name of the common good—this most heinous of crimes.

This is the third major declaration in as many years from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The first of these attacked the errors of Schoonenberg and Rahner concerning Christology. The second reproved the errors of Hans Kueng, Avery Dulles, and many others regarding the Church—her identity and

infallibility. Now comes the *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, issued not in Latin like the others but in French.

When a doctrinal statement is issued by the Vatican in a modern language, there is a reason. In this case it is obvious that part of the reason is the legislative situation in France at that time: a drive for liberalized abortion

succeeded in the National Assembly (and later also in the Senate) with the blessing of President Giscard d'Estaing. But less obviously, there is also a peculiar *theological* situation in France: Catholic thinkers decline to recognize the fetus as authentically human or, alternatively, decline to insist upon the "Catholic" position in a secular, pluralistic society. These two situations, the one speculative and the other practical or legislative, will sound immediately familiar to Americans. We, too, have Rockefellers, Currans, and Drinans. Why, then, did the Vatican choose to speak on this burning subject in French rather than in English?

The answer to that question lies, I think, in a bitter irony. The United States has never been a Catholic country; from the beginning, we have found it necessary

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"TO RE-ESTABLISH
ALL THINGS IN CHRIST"

(Ephesians 1:10)

The Wanderer

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MAXIMIZING LIBERTY AT THE EXPENSE OF MORALITY

Very simply. They define the common good the way almost all politicians define it: either the maximum of liberty or the maximum of prosperity. Then they ask: which is more important, that everybody behave the way you or I might want them to behave, or that everybody be free? Or: which is better, that every baby be born into a world overcrowded and hungry, like Calcutta, or that only wanted babies be born into a world of plenty? The trick is in the very definition of the common good, as though it were something indifferent to our morals but not to theirs. As though liberty could survive undimmed even if all citizens use it as the cloak of vice. As if the prosperity of nations were a function of high consumption and not rather a function of moral fiber. An arbitrary definition of liberty (that of the English Whigs and French Jacobins) is married to an arbitrary definition of prosperity (that of the corporate technocrats). From both definitions the Vatican dissents. The *Declaration on Procured Abortion* is designed to liberate Catholics (and all others of good will) from the trammels of a false and complacent secularism — a secularism which establishes its empire not only in the exterior structures of the state but also in the hearts and brains of Christians themselves. Especially in America, and even more especially in France, Catholics acting in their role as citizens have gradually forgotten that "a Christian's outlook cannot be limited to the horizon of life in the world" (paragraph 25), that "to measure happiness by the absence of sorrow and misery in this world is to turn one's back on the Gospel" (*ibid.*), and that, therefore, "the path of true progress of the human person passes through constant fidelity to a conscience maintained in uprightness and truth" (paragraph 24).

Neglecting these truths, both here and in France, Catholics have been paralyzed by a specious conviction that the common good, toward which they must work as citizens, is a purely temporal, material and pragmatic thing, essentially different from the reign of Christ the King toward which they are supposed to work as Catholics. Admit that difference, and you give clear field to Mr. Rockefeller's morals — and the whole political arena belongs immediately, by default, to the enemies of Christ, conscious or unwitting. Allow that default to continue, allow it to become second nature to the Catholic voter, and within a few years you have Robert Drinan, S.J. Instead of Catholic elected officials, you have sold-out lawyers. Instead of Catholic politics, you have Commonwealth, ready and eager to say that the ends of the Catholic Church and the common good of America are clean different things. And soon, too, you have Catholics for a Free Choice, a collection of contraceptive housewives ready and eager to tell Congress that the ends of the Catholic Church are benighted, vicious, and hostile to the common good.

Why be surprised? The established religion always attracts conformists. Allow Mr. Rockefeller's morals to be established, and he will make converts.

Such is the price of default. The common good is the final cause of all political life. Define the common good, and you have defined your master. No man can serve two masters, not even the Catholic voter. Either virtue and its eternal reward are the final cause and hence the common good of our people, or else their common good is, oh, a full stomach and free sex. One or the other. Robert Drinan refuses to choose; the Catholics for a Free Choice, more consistent, have chosen.

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

Now, this line of argument adopted by the Vatican might be thought of as taking a high and perhaps difficult ground, but it does go to the heart of the question. One can start on lower ground. Liberty, for example: mine ends where your nose begins. A woman's liberty to do what she pleases ends where her unborn baby begins. This is absolutely true, but the Vatican goes further. The attempt to make abortion a matter of individual liberty is not just a misapplication of liberty; it is a misapplication made plausible, in the first place, only by a false definition of liberty. Take prosperity: how does anybody know how many people the Earth can feed? Population growth has led to prosperity and technological advance in the past; it may easily continue to do so. On the other hand, ZPG is a formula for economic disaster, as a declining work force will be taxed to support a disproportionate number of the

retired. Very true, but again the Vatican goes further. We respect and foster human life because it is our moral duty to do so, not because we expect to get rich by it. We might get terribly poor; so be it: it is not shameful nor "inhuman" to be poor. But it is worse than inhuman to butcher little babies in order to stay rich.

Because man does not live by bread alone, said Christ, and because it is not merely the absence of constraint but the Truth which makes man free, said the same Christ, it follows that (I repeat) "damage to moral values is always a greater evil for the common good than any disadvantage in the economic or demographic order."

CHARTER FOR POLITICAL ACTION

In this context, the full import of the present *Declaration* is clear. This is not a ho-hum document. It is not the Pope saying for the umpteenth time what everybody already expected him to say — that abortion is contrary to the moral law. This is much more: it is a firm rejection of the contemporary, secular conception of the common good, hence necessarily a charter for political action. Thus paragraph 22: "It must in any case be clearly understood that a Christian can never conform to a law which is in itself immoral, and such is the case of a law which would admit in principle the licity of abortion. Nor can a Christian take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, nor vote for it. Moreover, he may not collaborate in its application." And on the positive side (paragraph 23): "a whole positive policy must be put into force so that there will always be a concrete, honorable, and possible alternative to abortion." To buttress this political offensive, there must be a moral offensive (paragraph 26): "But it is necessary at the same time to influence morality and to do everything possible to help families, mothers, and children." And a moral offensive requires a renewed intellectual orientation (paragraph 27): "There will be no effective action on the level of morality unless at the same time an effort is made on the level of ideas. A point of view — or even more, perhaps, a way of thinking — which considers fertility as an evil cannot be allowed to spread without contradiction."

Here, a striking vindication for those who have argued, like voices in the desert, that the key to abortion is the contraceptive mentality. Again, the Vatican has gone to the heart: admit contraception and inevitably you will have to admit its bloody "backstop." Let married people think they have a "right" not to have children, and there will be no restricting the measures they take to avoid them. This Vatican analysis — is it not squarely athwart the "policy" of the American and West

European Bishops? Have not those Bishops made it clear by a hundred demure silences, a hundred acts of studied negligence, that they consider the official teaching on contraception "inopportune"? Here is a sin, not against Church regulations, but against the natural law, no less, and they refuse to denounce it. They do not denounce it to their governments; they do not denounce it to their own penitents. "A point of view which considers fertility as an evil" is daily allowed to spread "without contradiction" — anywhere, everywhere. Now, the Vatican says, that "policy" cannot go on.

It is not very likely that the Vatican will be obeyed — in certain places. Places like the chancery of the Archdiocese of Paris, or the major seminary of the Archdiocese of Detroit. But there are other places: parishes, homes, modest offices where thousands are eager to do exactly as this *Declaration* commands. No, they have already been doing it. This is a capital point.

AN EXTRAORDINARY ALLY

The moral and political analysis contained in this document, and imposed by it, is point by point identical to the position long advanced in this Country by right-to-life activists of the "hard-line" stripe and by a small handful of publications (this newspaper being, by the grace of God, one of them). Recollect the main points: (1) abortion must be opposed from fertilization; (2) it must be opposed politically as well as morally; (3) a pro-life politics must reject the dominant, secularist conceptions of the common good; (4) a law which recognizes the licity of abortion, even in principle, is immoral, such that no Christian can conform to it, favor it, vote for it, nor collaborate in its application; (5) a massive effort to provide women with alternatives to abortion must be accompanied with a massive effort of moral reeducation; (6) there can be no peace with the "contraceptive mentality." Is this the way *America* magazine talks? Or the Network? Or Fr. Drinan? Or Msgr. McHugh? Is it not, rather, exactly the way Life Lobby talks, and the U.S. Coalition for Life, and *The Wanderer*, and perhaps the new leadership of the NRLC? Indeed, these latter groups — we hard-liners — have looked pretty isolated until now, pretty likely to be swept aside in the grand talk of "compromise" and of "more sophisticated" strategy. But now we have been vindicated in the most striking way. Point by point, our moral and political approach has been seconded by an extraordinary ally: the only ally on Earth who can communicate to our efforts — by every worldly yardstick weak — the unworldly strength of an Apostolic Benediction.