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*Dissent in  
the Catholic  
Church*

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*by Jenefer Ellington*

A SERIES PUBLISHED BY CATHOLICS FOR A FREE CHOICE

*“Religion is politics made  
sacred. It was the way the power  
structure on earth was made  
sacred in the sky.”*

*—Gloria Steinem  
1981*

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# INTRODUCTION

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**T**HIS PAMPHLET IS AN INVITATION to look at the institutional history of the Catholic Church and measure it against the experiences of its membership, past and present. This membership is the mainstream in which the church flourishes.

At many times in history, conscience has led believers to advocate a path of dissent from church teaching. The church, hampered by an institutional concern for stability, has been unresponsive to the believers' vision. It has neglected its role of pathfinder. In seeking to protect its doctrine against error and its prestige against attack, the church has assumed a defensive posture. Historically, this posture has corresponded with the decline of Catholicism as a meaningful force in Western life.

But often church membership and society have pulled the church along with them towards enlightenment. For the sake of its own preservation, the church has changed.

The church continues to change. The intention of this booklet is to assist the reader in solving contemporary moral questions in the light of Catholic doctrine but unimpeded by the institutional rigidity that resists reform.

Church doctrine does not cover every uncertainty in life. Nor does it make that attempt. Each life, with its confusion, blunders, and resolution, is a process of coming into harmony with each individual's plan for salvation. Although enlightenment is gathered and embodied in church doctrine, one person's grasp is not the same as another's. Neither is one

person's salvation the same as another's. The struggle for each of our souls is carried on within our consciences even while we are members of the church.

Thus there is a dual nature to our spiritual lives. We consult with church doctrine, and we communicate with our own souls. And though doctrine is a guide, it is the individual with a free will who seeks the road to salvation.

The Catholic Church exists on two levels. It is a tangible organization with a structure and with identifiable principles and rules. This is its institutional identity. But it is also a movement of living, ever-changing humans animated by their own consciences to bear witness to a belief system. The relationship is such that the institution exists *for* human salvation and humans seek their salvation *through* the church. The church exists *for* woman and man, not woman and man for the church.

The Catholic Church shares characteristics common to all institutions. Most notably, it clings to the social beliefs and structures that prevailed when it matured from a movement to an institution. Institutions are not simply deposited on earth as one lays the cornerstone of a building. Institutions are what movements become, if they endure long enough to take root in the social fabric. In taking root, institutions tend to set the conditions in which they thrive.

Buildings or churches themselves are the visible sign of transition from movement to institutional status. The "stuff" of social movements is the group of individuals that embraces a shared idea. An institution depends on these individuals for its existence, but it also has a life of its own. It is an organization, a structural overlay that gives stability and legitimacy to the continuous flow of mainstream membership. The membership is the life's blood that invigorates the institution.

The fact that religion allows people to reach beyond daily necessity and to fulfill their spiritual destiny cannot cancel the institutional nature of a church. Its function is to preserve itself. This is as true for a banking house concerned with stable currency as it is for a church dedicated to spiritual salvation.

In light of this, the booklet will address the contemporary crisis of conscience suffered by Catholics when they face the decision to use or not to use contraception, or to have or not to have an abortion. The Catholic Church has condemned both as violations of natural and divine law. Such law exists only as the hierarchy of the church interprets it. The church does not recognize any other moral law.

The great majority of Catholics, however, dissent from church understanding of natural and divine law as it is applied to their own sexuality and childbearing decisions. Their dissent constitutes a classic confrontation, in modern terms, of a dynamic membership reminding an archaic institution of its need to reform.

An illustration of the tension between preservers of the old doctrine and builders of the new is found in the New Testament. When Jesus went to the temple, he found the scribes and pharisees well versed in sacred scripture. They confronted Jesus with the old law as it was written. Jesus did not deny their knowledge of the law. He answered their questions with new law, law that was not bound to the past but spoke to the experience of the present. He taught that God's love informs and reflects God's law. To teach God's law without love denies God's will.



OBEDIENCE

SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE CHURCH



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## CHAPTER ONE

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# SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE CHURCH

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**B**EGINNING WITH EARLY CHRISTIAN HISTORY, *radical changes in social thinking have occurred which left the church stranded, so to speak, on the shore. In each case, the changes posed questions to church authority. Here are instances in which the church gradually revised its thinking in order to obtain unity with its members and regain its authority.*

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## FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

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**I**n the first 100–200 years of the Roman empire, the Christians were a movement, not an institutional church. They were treated as outcasts by the state. As such they were oppressed and often martyred.

Over time, Christianity gained in numbers and influence. A power reversal occurred when the Roman emperor Constantine converted and installed Christianity as the religion of the empire. Christians, who had long been challengers to Rome, came to occupy high seats of power in Rome.

In its new role, the Christian Church matured from a movement to an institution. To establish itself, it began to practice the same abuses it had previously suffered from. Christian history is filled with reports of forced conversion, “holy” war against barbarian unbelievers and the burning of dissenters as heretics. The church, like other institutions before it, compelled people to subscribe, at least publicly, to its practices and beliefs. In its

attempt to discipline nonbelievers and throw down its own roots, it denied freedom of conscience.

In the first 1400 years of church history, a pattern of response to church authority developed throughout Europe. As the church attempted to expand and fortify its power, independent pockets of dissenters sprang up to challenge church control. Territorial leaders defined their own sovereignty and refused to pay tributes—financial, military or political—to Rome. Imposition of Christianity through force, however, was contradictory to the true

teachings of the church. As society consistently balked, Rome's grip on the populace lessened. Reluctantly the church relinquished its dictatorial stand, subscribed to freedom of conscience and returned the church to its members.

Eventually, the period in which the church saw itself as an "avenging angel" came to an end. But the precedent of challenging church authority on the grounds of freedom of conscience was set.

*The precedent of challenging church authority on the grounds of freedom of conscience was set.*

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## SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

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**D**uring the Middle Ages, the Roman bishop viewed himself as the anointed head and final authority of Christendom. The boundaries of Christendom were shared with that loose conglomerate, the Holy Roman Empire. Secular rulers, from emperor down to baron, were expected to acknowledge papal rule and thus sanctify their own positions. Far from a separation of church and state, the church actually controlled the state by virtue of the power it claimed to receive directly from God.

The pope's authority was certain. The pope could excommunicate a secular leader and release his subjects from allegiance to him. If the ruler persisted in flouting papal authority, the pope could urge his subjects to insurrection. Thus paradoxically at a time when obedience to authority was a supreme virtue, the pope could bless disobedience if it was in his own interest. So great was the compass of papal power that when explorers first brought word of unknown lands to Europe, it was the pope who saw fit to divide the untouched territory between a grasping Spain and Portugal.

Over the centuries, kings cemented their power, and the sovereign state gradually emerged. Canon law gave way to secular law. Papal power was hedged in by independent kingdoms that justified their equality with the pope by creating the principle of "Divine Right of Kings." This principle asserted that while the pope held spiritual dominion over all Christendom, monarchs held earthly sway by God's direct appointment. Forced to share its authority with secular rulers, the papacy finally bowed to the principle of a separation of church and state.

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## WAR: JUST AND UNJUST

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**T**hroughout history there have been few genuinely pacifist groups. The Catholic Church has not been one of them. For much of its existence, the Catholic Church's status as a secular power with territory to defend

made war a useful political instrument. So while the church felt morally impelled to denounce war, it could not renounce it altogether. It had its own wars to wage. Pope Julius II (1443-1513), for example, led his own troops into battle and was known to be a formidable military leader.

St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas borrowed the principle of a "just war" from Aristotle and incorporated it into Christian theology. Augustine argued simultaneously that war was caused by sin and that war was the remedy for sin. According to the church's view, a war to restrain the heathen, or to capture a holy land, or to defend one's boundaries for reasons of self-preservation was just. Pope Leo IV declared that anyone who died while fighting the heathen went directly to heaven.

In our own era, the church endorsed the fight against "godless communism" as a religious war. In the recent instance of the war in Vietnam, the church was perceived as a public and emphatic supporter of American involvement. A highly visible Cardinal Spellman vociferously endorsed the armed forces there. The actual representative body of the American church, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, sat out the war divided among themselves and hesitant to address the issue.

As the Vietnam war dragged on, more and more Catholic laity and lower clergy joined the ranks of protestors and demonstrators. Late in the conflict, the church finally dropped the illusion of its support and recognized the legitimate moral position of conscientious objectors.

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## THE THREAT OF REVOLUTION

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Revolution and its impact on society distinguished it from other forms of war. Whereas war was combat between two sovereign powers, revolution was a challenge to the "natural order" of human society. The church was always sensitive to, and even fearful of, the threat that revolution presents to an established order. In the eyes of the church, this order was reflected on all levels, from the animal kingdom to the universe at large. Revolution sought to unravel that authoritarian model. It was more than violence of man against man. It was a defiance of God's plan.

Even heaven, according to the church, was designed according to a plan. In heaven's hierarchy, seraphim, cherubim, archangels and mere

*"Accept your lot! Practice the  
Christian virtues of obedience  
and resignation!"*

angels were higher than saints and ordinary souls. In the early church's view, political, social, and religious institutions all exemplified a similar plan. Allegiance to one's political overlord was similar to submission to one's

spiritual guide. To question secular authority was suspiciously like doubting sacred authority. That was heresy. According to St. Augustine, one's lot in life was the one to which he or she was born. To accept one's lot was to practice the Christian virtue of obedience and resignation.

This rigid structure of rulership reached its high point in the Middle Ages and then began a gradual decline. Governments were slowly reshaped and societies formed in different molds. It became clear that hierarchy was only one of many possibilities. People refused to submit unthinkingly to any authority. They began to grope for individual freedom,



knowledge, and responsibility suited to a more democratic context.

Yet the church held fast to the old order. It resisted institutional change both as unnatural and as an attack upon its own foundation. This was verified by the revolt of France in the 18th century. The French Revolution was aimed not only at the monarchy, but at the Catholic Church as well. The revolution removed the church as a privileged class, appropriated its huge land holdings, lessened its grip on education, and tried to extirpate it from the social fabric. From then on, the church was convinced that all revolutions were tinged with, if not committed to, socialism, violation of property rights, and atheism. It sided ever more strongly with established power.

The church, however, could not stop the evolution of Western thought towards individual rights and freedoms. It saw that excommunication of unruly leaders could not restore an obsolete order. Eventually, it rejoined the mainstream of social thinking which placed social justice for the deprived above preservation of a ruling elite.

Even so, we in the 20th century have witnessed the church supporting dictators Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal and the return of a monarchy in Italy. In Central and South America today, the church is still torn between its attachment to governing authority and social justice for the poor. The church does not speak with certainty about what is morally right for those crying out for change. It urges dictatorial governments to respond to social needs, but it stops short of denouncing such governments when they do not.

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## THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE INSIDE CHURCH WALLS

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**T**hroughout the first thousand years of its life, the Catholic Church preserved and protected whatever knowledge we had of ourselves and the universe we inhabited. The populace was largely illiterate and ignorant. The printing press had yet to be invented. There were no means to give direct access to learning to the multitudes. The church harbored whatever learning existed in its monasteries. At that time one could say that the scholar and the monk were one.

The Bible and sacred Scripture were the major sources and touchstones of knowledge. Yet they remained untranslated from the scholarly tongues of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. The clergy interpreted them for the faithful. Outside of the Bible, the only way to discover divine will was through revelation. Individual revelation, however, was not considered valid until it had been certified by the church. Consequently, understanding of the universe remained frozen within the bounds of biblical metaphor and clerical interpretation.

While church inquiry stood still, the desire to know intensified. Individual minds took on the task of translating the Bible for public reading. But the promethean work of the translators proved to be their own undoing. The church rewarded translators Wyclif, Hus and Tyndale by burning them as heretics. Nevertheless, the pursuit of knowledge continued and

church efforts to curtail it did not prevail.

Two classic examples of defiance of both the Bible and church dictate were Galileo's discovery of the true motions of the solar system and, much later, the formulation of the theory of evolution. These discoveries resulted from the use of the "scientific method." The scientific method,

*Papal infallibility now gave Catholics a mere passenger status on the voyage of their own salvation.*

familiar to every school child today, was applied to obtain knowledge through observation of the actual world, not through scrutiny of biblical texts. It became the means to direct knowledge outside the Bible. This

knowledge was distinct from revelation in the biblical sense. As such, it could not be controlled or suppressed by the church. With the new tool of a scientific method, the advancement of learning entered the public domain. Oftentimes this left the church clinging to discredited myths.

These examples indicate a church problem deeper than its simple defense of disputed beliefs. What we witness is the institutional church's refusal to understand that "revelation" of a divine plan through discovery of natural law is available to all. Knowledge is not only the privileged information of those who study the Bible and immerse themselves in a life of sanctity and prayer. Knowledge is also the inevitable result of observation and experience.

The Age of Enlightenment found the church in a quandary. It had to cope with discoveries made outside of church auspices. No longer the guardian at the gate of knowledge, the church sought to carve out its own specialized area of knowledge. The notion of infallibility, enunciated by the church in 1870 was a solution.

The infallibility dogma declared that the pope can speak definitively on matters of faith and morals. Having spoken, his word is church law. This dogma effectively denied the faithful the living experience of investigation. It relegated them to passenger status on the voyage of their own salvation.

MORAL ISSUES IN AMERICAN HISTORY



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CHAPTER TWO

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MORAL ISSUES  
IN AMERICAN  
HISTORY

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**I**N THIS RAPID OVERVIEW of history, we have seen the institutional church fix upon a hierarchical order as one which had assured its own perpetuation in the past. Society and the faithful meanwhile moved towards pluralism and individual freedom. Many structural changes occurred in this transformation of society. The fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire, the multiplication of Christian denominations and the gradual replacement of monarchy by republican and democratic forms were natural human developments. They were not aberrations to be rectified by church fiat at some future date.

The next logical step in social evolution was recognition of the right to rule oneself, to seek one's destiny and thereby to acknowledge the individual search for salvation. It is at this step that we find the modern church in hesitation today.

The pattern of behaviour of the institutional Catholic Church described so far can be traced in our own history in the United States. It is a pattern of reaction to social change rather than initiation to correct social wrongs.

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## SLAVERY AND CIVIL RIGHTS

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Slavery has been part of human society since humans began keeping records. The advent of the Catholic Church made no change. Although Christianity took a great step by recognizing the importance of the individual soul to God, it did not go further. It did not demand equality in the social order. Slaves, it was thought, had their place. Their virtue was obedience, just as women had a place subordinate to men and obedience was also expected from them.

Eventually the indignity of slavery stood revealed. It was condemned as inhuman and unnatural, but the Catholic Church was not in the forefront of this condemnation. Officially in 1839 the church condemned the slave trade, but not the ownership of slaves. A review of the abolition movement leading to the Civil War in the U.S. gives no leading role to the church; however, the church has long since condemned the practice.

*Slaves, like women, had their place. The virtues of obedience and knowing their place were expected from them.*

On the issue of segregation in church or school one must look through the perspective of history to understand the attitude of the Catholic Church. In Europe, the Catholic Church was the major religion in Christendom. It was the chief educator long before society gave that role to the state.

In the United States, minority status was unfamiliar and uncomfortable for the church. Coupled with the constitutional separation of church and state, minority status made the church's position even more confusing. Thus it fought hard at first to keep its own religious teaching in the schools. Failing that, it required that all Catholics send their children to parochial schools.

There were very few black Catholics. Their chance of attending a Catholic church or school was slight. In other denominations and in public schools the races were segregated and the Catholic Church followed that practice. It must be remarked that the well-known missionary zeal of the Catholic Church spent itself in African and Asian countries and not on blacks at home.

While there was a gradual increase in the number of black Catholics, they were not permitted to enter parochial schools before the 1930's. Then, the number was token and hardly bore witness to a commitment to integration. Only when the civil rights movement of the 1950's and '60's got underway did the church press for racial equality. What can be discerned here is another instance of the church shifting emphasis, if not doing an about-face, to keep itself in step with the social movement of its membership.

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## RIGHTS OF LABOR

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The advent of the industrial revolution brought the use of collectivized human labor hired in the market place for productive work in factories. These factories were owned and managed by those who invested the capital to start the enterprise. Factory owners argued that a fair wage for one's labor was strictly an economic question determined

by the supply/demand situation in the market place. No moral question was involved. Therefore industrialists argued that it was inappropriate for the church to intrude moral law in the dealings between owners and workers.

Indeed the church was not inclined to interfere. It had always been allied with property owners who reciprocally supported the church. Together they assured the stability of the social system. Stability continued to rank high on the scale of values, often higher than social justice. As in other instances, obedience was touted as the prime virtue for the poor.

Workers, however, rejected an economic and social position of permanent powerlessness. But their efforts were met with legal barriers, threats and violent retribution. In both Europe and America, strikes ended with workers being shot, beaten, and arrested. The church was silent and did not condemn the system or the behaviour of the industrial leaders.

Labor unrest in Europe was closely connected with political movements that were democratic or democratic-socialist. These movements brought politics to the boiling point in 1848 when every industrial European capital was caught in the throes of rebellion. Governments were overthrown or forced into hiding.

The success of the popular forces was temporary. Soon enough the reactionary governments were back in power. The Catholic Church was at their side, more suspicious than before of organized workers.

In America, the labor movement kept up a struggle for workers' rights without staging massive rebellions. A string of bloody confrontations with

*Only after the workers had clearly won, did the Catholic Church of Poland fully bless their actions.*

factory workers was enough to keep the Catholic Church sided with property owners. Only the intervention of an American cardinal forestalled the Vatican from condemnation of the Knights of Labor, an American organization of workers, in 1886. The American prelate, Cardinal Gibbons, defended the right of workers to organize and warned the church of the danger of siding regularly with owners against labor.

Pope Leo XIII set the church on a new course with his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. In it, Leo stated that social issues had a moral dimension to which the church could speak. He asserted the right of labor to organize. He did not, however, give a similar blessing to the right to strike. Without the right to strike, a labor movement has no muscle. Leo instead encouraged workers to form religious societies and groups that brought labor and management together. Workers, long polarized by violent confrontations with factory owners, did not take these suggestions seriously.

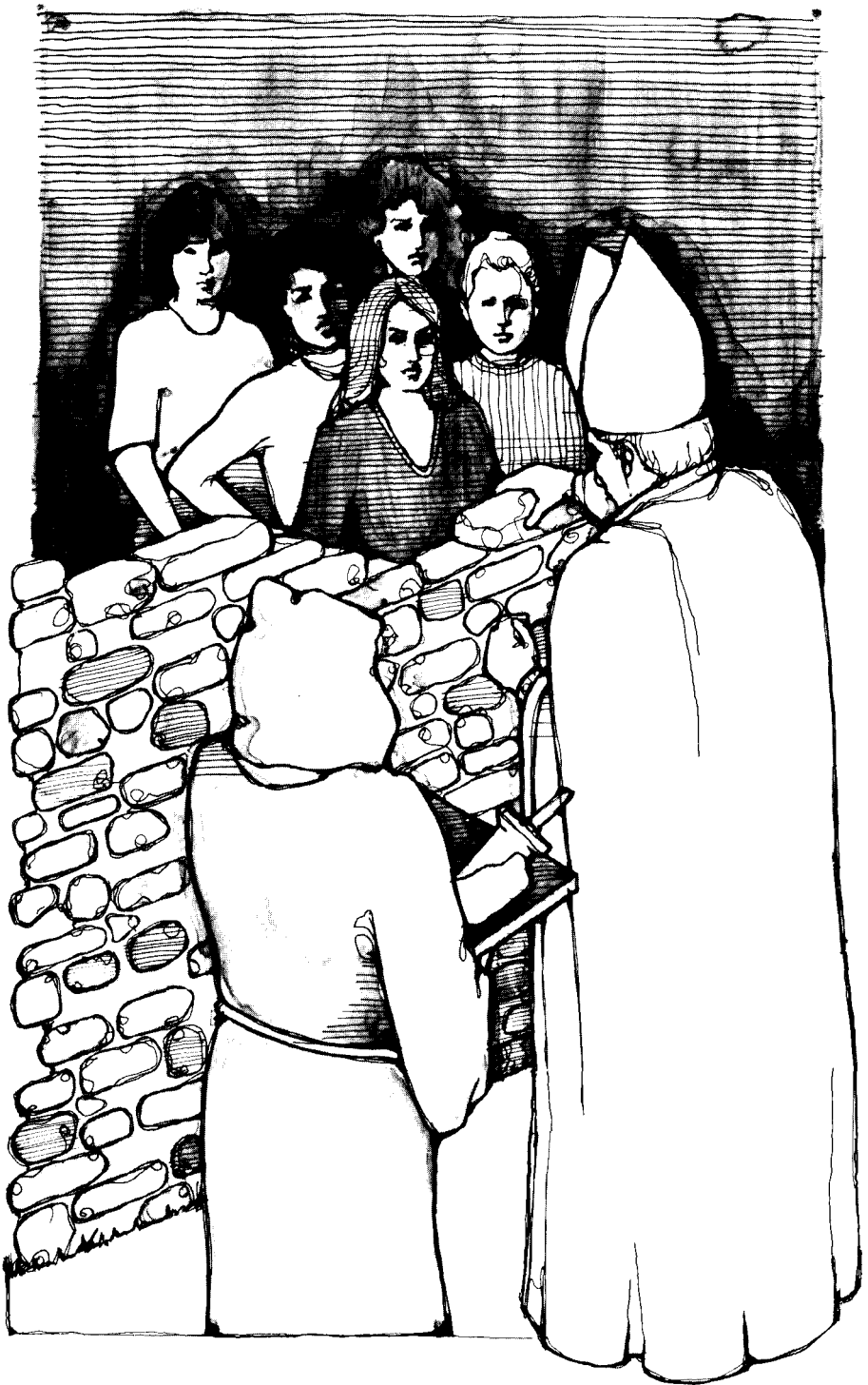
In 1931, after almost a century of violent disputes over the rights of labor, Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical that reinforced the pleas of Leo XIII. Pius XI argued further for a new social order guaranteeing to the worker a fair reward for his labor. He did not, however, provide a model from which working Catholics could pursue their rights.

As recently as the fall of 1980 in Poland, in the first weeks of a dramatic challenge by labor to the state, the church hierarchy urged Polish workers to end their strike and return to work. Only after the workers had clearly won a victory over the beleaguered Polish government did the Catholic Church of Poland step from behind the shadow of the Polish state and fully bless the actions of the workers.

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# SOCIAL CHANGE TODAY

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## CHAPTER THREE

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# SOCIAL CHANGE TODAY

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**S**OCIETY IS INHERENTLY DYNAMIC. *It is constantly living out a process of structural change. These changes do not necessarily repudiate past principles but they often rearrange relationships to fit new conditions. Each individual soul confronts the moral problems particular to the changes in its circumstances. One searches one's conscience and experience for solutions. In doing so, life is not a passive re-run of a formula dictated outside of the conscience. Rather in one's choices, one becomes the incarnate instrument of God's plan for humankind.*

*What role should the church play in this endless drama? It is the preserver; it shelters and restores; it guides and encourages; and it is the visible expression of the search for God.*

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## THE CHURCH AS INSTITUTION

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**W**hile the church has performed as guide and teacher, too often its institutional preoccupation overshadows this role. Its tendency to lag behind its membership is more acutely painful in an age of rapid change such as our century has been. We barely absorb and assimilate what we have discovered when we must address new problems and revise our understanding of old ones. Our knowledge of the physical universe, of ourselves and where we fit in the "grand scheme" leaps beyond church boundaries



even as those boundaries become historical landmarks of earlier thinking.

Each time the church rejects or ignores new knowledge, it loses its ability to serve Christian women and men in their search for God. Its character as a living expression of God's will diminishes when it loses step with the world in which Christians live, thrive and die.

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## CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION

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**I**n the 19th and 20th centuries, the physical sciences fairly exploded with new discoveries. While nature once determined early mortality, science has largely superseded nature and handed us the responsibility for our own lives and health.

Contraceptive devices and medical abortion are among those scientific discoveries that have changed our lives. They are a means for us to take hold of our own destiny rather than allow nature to rule us in random fashion.

For most of human history we did not understand the exact process of conception. We did not know that ovulation lasts for approximately three days. Nor could we tell that the generation of new life requires insemination during those days. Thus we could not believe that sexual intercourse and procreation were always inextricably linked. And indeed, they are not. Couples may go many months and sometimes years without the woman conceiving, or desiring to conceive.

*Contraception and abortion enable us to take hold of our own destiny rather than allow nature to rule us in random fashion.*

Nevertheless the church ordained that every act of sexual intercourse must be open to the transmission of life, although clearly every act is not. God's words to Noah after the flood, "Go forth, be fruitful and multiply!" were construed as a proof that intercourse must always be for conception and that to interfere was to violate natural law and divine will. To choose when to get pregnant rather than leave it to chance was called a great sin.

But believers asked, why should nature randomly assign what people can deliberately choose for themselves? The biological self is bound to nature only in the sense that the heart cannot decide to pump or the eyes to see, though one may close them. The church argues that free will decisions must be made in accordance with natural law. But natural law does not dictate that conception must follow every act of intercourse. Is every act of love made in ignorance of the connection with conception lacking the right intention? Is it a violation of nature?

The church's stance reflects an entrenchment in past ignorance and a denial of present knowledge. It is coupled with a desire to maintain the authority built upon that ignorance. For hundreds of years, humans were subjected by that ignorance to the whims of nature and their own superstitions. The church taught believers to accept their lot, bow to the will of heaven and thus win salvation.

Today, many believers find that it is not enough to bow their heads and excuse themselves by saying, "It is the will of God." They cannot play helpless when they are no longer ignorant. As Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is expected." God has granted the means to know and the obligation to act on the consequences of our knowledge.

As long as the human race was subject to the many ills and misfortunes of nature, it was struggling to survive by multiplying or risk annihilation. That time is long past. That threat has been replaced by the counterthreat of population overflow. We have discovered that simply to multiply is a fact, not a virtue. To multiply at the expense of others is negligent and irresponsible. To reject the control gained by human investigation is to resubmit ourselves to accident.

In a highly individuated world where parenthood requires the ability to feed, clothe, shelter and educate one's offspring, it is foolish not to control one's own reproduction. Far more serious than the problem of sustenance is the cruel mischief of having an unwanted child. This point alone argues that conception should be by intention, not by accident.

The church and its members mutually perceive the seriousness of parenthood and the necessity not to enter into it lightly. Here the agreement ends. The church insists on nature's uncontrolled prerogative in the face of frightening consequences for individuals and for the human race. Nature unattended will brutally cut down any species which overflows its limits. We have taken control of those limits and will set the boundaries to insure the survival of all. It falls to us to discipline our growth by the most benign means possible. In many parts of the world, more mouths to feed means unquestionably that more will starve. Many thinking people believe that it is more responsible to prevent a life that will soon starve than to add another child to those already starving. Contraceptive methods are still in the exploratory stage and when lesser means fail, abortion must be available as a last resort.

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## A CHALLENGE TO AUTHORITY

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**O**n closer scrutiny, it appears that the church's real objection to personal reproductive choice is not that it violates natural and divine law. Rather, reproductive choice calls for the placement of an individual's judgment between herself or himself and church authority. The church's complaint with this follows logically on its belief that an institutional hierarchy, and not the conscience itself, holds the key to divine will.

Catholics today no longer look to the church to answer every question in their spiritual lives. They understand that human knowledge has gained

*Reproductive choice calls for the interposition of an individual's conscience between herself and church authority.*

for them some control over their own lives. To reject that control is to resubmit themselves to the authority of others. Rejection of control is a denial of their own free will. It denies human nature's peculiar mix of ignorance and

knowledge, and its uneven command over life's events as the very condition of existence. This is not a special set of circumstances that confront believers because they have defied God's will. It is the permanent condition in which they play out their destiny.

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