

Individual Conscience

By Father John Catoir - 2/20/16

An article in the WALL STREET JOURNAL dated Feb. 20, 2016 had this eye-catching headline: “Pope Urges More Reliance on Individual Conscience.” It surprised me, and brought a sigh of relief.

It surprised me because the condemnation of contraceptives by the Catholic Church has caused great suffering in the past. Legalists always insisted there was an absolute prohibition against birth control based on the words of Pope Paul VI in his 1968 Encyclical ‘Humanae Vitae’- “every such act is intrinsically evil.”

Pope Francis praised this document as prophetic, but he also urged priests to show “compassion in particular cases where the document is not followed.” Priests have been slow to correct penitents about practicing birth-control. In fact it is rarely confessed as a sin because Catholics, by and large, have formed their consciences on the topic.

The headline brought me relief because it was a papal reaffirmation that individuals have the right to excuse themselves from the letter of the law in certain circumstances. Obviously any exception leads to far reaching implications. Fr. Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson said, the pope was saying that in “situations of grave urgency, a well formed conscience can see (relief) as a necessary recourse.”

Pope Francis told reporters on his flight home from Mexico, that practicing contraception would not be evil (Not every act is evil) in areas afflicted by the Zika virus, because of the growing evidence linking it to serious birth defect. Sometimes the phrase “special circumstances” applies to vast areas of Asia, and widespread personal conditions.

The exception clause granted by the Pope states that reliance on conscience is not only permissible but it is part of our moral heritage. Long ago the bishops expressed their awareness that our culture makes raising a large family extremely difficult for most couples. Consequently the US Bishops issued a Pastoral Letter, On Human Life, back in 1968 to help individuals form their conscience. Here is an excerpt from that document: “In the final analysis, conscience is inviolable, and no person is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his/her conscience, as the moral tradition of the Church attests.” They said nearly 50 years ago, exactly what Pope Francis is saying now.

Already, during the 2015 Vatican Synod on family issues, Archbishop Blasé Cupich of Chicago, an appointee of Pope Francis, said that “divorced and civilly remarried Catholics “should follow their own conscience

in deciding whether to receive Communion.” He also said that partners in same sex marriages should likewise follow their conscience in deciding whether to receive Communion, (Ibid. WSJ p.A7).

The Vatican Synod was deeply divided over the Communion issue, not to mention the larger issue of the acceptability of homosexuality. Conservative prelates are alarmed that any relaxation of the letter of the law threatens the Church’s broader stance on moral issues.

Reactions are mounting. Philip Lawler, editor of the Catholic Culture website, wrote, “The Pope’s own words are-at best-confusing.” My own reaction for what it’s worth is one of acceptance. I welcome the give and take with all the confusion. The last word hasn’t yet been proclaimed.

I see hope on the horizon, and I urge you to ponder the deeper realization that we are all sinners, and we all need God’s mercy. Mercy is another name for love as it confronts misery and confusion.

We’ll get through this. So let’s be calm and turn it all over to the Lord in the comforting knowledge that the Holy Spirit will be with us until the end of time.