

# The Facts of Life & Marriage

*Social Science & the Vindication of Christian Moral Teaching*

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by *W. Bradford Wilcox*

In 1968, Pope Paul VI released *Humanae Vitae*, an encyclical affirming the Christian tradition's ancient and constant moral teaching that contraception is wrong. Sadly, *Humanae Vitae* came as a shock to many Christians inside and outside the Catholic Church, who thought that the church was ready to accommodate herself to the modern view of marriage as primarily a relational, not procreative, institution.

Indeed, in the wake of *Humanae Vitae*, the Catholic Church largely lost her ability to successfully convince the American laity, not to mention Christians throughout the West, of the truth and beauty of her moral teaching on matters related to sex and marriage. Three historical, sociological, and intellectual factors help account for this failure.

## **Three Failures**

First, *Humanae Vitae* came at the worst possible moment in history. The encyclical arrived in the wake of Vatican II, just after the Catholic Church had thrown open her windows to the modern world. Unfortunately, the modern world was then succumbing to the siren song of the sexual revolution, was awash in a pervasive anti-authoritarianism, and inclined to a hedonistic ethic fueled by unprecedented affluence. As the Catholic biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson observed at a forum sponsored by *Commonweal* magazine, "American Catholics truly became American at [precisely the] moment when America itself was undergoing a cultural revolution."

In the aftermath of John F. Kennedy's ascendancy to the presidency, and their own dramatic increases in educational and economic attainment, Catholics in the United States were coming into their own as independent-minded Americans. With their newfound status, they were less inclined to extend undue deference to the opinions of the Holy Father, and the Catholic Church more generally, especially on matters that would require them to sacrifice their cherished American aspirations to upward mobility and consumer comfort—sacrifices often associated with having a large family. For all these reasons, most American Catholics in the late 1960s and 1970s rejected *Humanae Vitae*.

Second, and just as ominously, this rejection led many of these same Catholics to call into question their commitment to the whole fabric of Catholic moral teaching on sex-related matters. If the Catholic Church is wrong on birth control, the thinking went, she is probably wrong on divorce and remarriage, premarital sex, and so on. As Johnson, himself a critic of *Humanae Vitae* observed, "The birth control issue finally initiated

many American Catholics into the hermeneutics of suspicion,” a hermeneutics that made them skeptical of all the church’s pronouncements regarding sexual morality.

Indeed, the controversy surrounding *Humanae Vitae* was, as Andrew Greeley pointed out in *The Catholic Myth*, “the occasion for massive apostasy and for [a] notable decline in religious devotion and belief,” as many Catholics concluded that the Catholic Church had fallen out of touch with the modern world. This controversy also hurt the church’s ability to speak to the larger Christian community on issues of sexual ethics and family life, as she was seen to be out of touch with the realities of modern marriage.

Third, the mistaken view that the church is hopelessly out of touch, hopelessly inflexible, and hopelessly bereft of compassion on matters related to sex and marriage has been and continues to be advanced by Catholic intellectuals with substantial public platforms. The pronouncements of Charles Curran, Andrew Greeley, Richard McBrien, and other like-minded Catholic theologians and social scientists have only added to the confusion, dissent, and scandal that swirls around Christian moral teaching.

In various ways, and with varying degrees of clarity and honesty, the dissenters argue that the church must accommodate her morality to the ways of the world if she hopes to speak in an authentic way to the experience and concerns of modern men and women. They also argue—and this is important—that the most compassionate route forward for the church is one that leads to changes in her moral teaching. Law must give way to grace, rules must give way to experience, dogma must give way to the Spirit, and the pope must give way to the people.

### **Accommodationist Error**

In the heady decade of the 1970s, when a countercultural tide swept over the Catholic Church and the nation as a whole, and the academy was in thrall to the counterculture, this accommodationist agenda seemed to have a certain plausibility. No longer.

The first problem is that the accommodationist agenda is based on bad social science. When most of these intellectuals were in their prime, the best social science suggested that the ideal posture of the church to “family change,” as it was euphemistically called, was one of acceptance and support. But contemporary social science on the contentious issues of our time—such as contraception, divorce, and cohabitation—suggests just the opposite conclusion. The shifts in sexual and familial behavior to which these dissenters would like the church to accommodate herself have been revealed in study after study to be social catastrophes.

Let me be perfectly clear: The leading scholars who have tackled these topics are not Christians, and most of them are not political or social conservatives. They are, rather, honest social scientists willing to follow the data wherever it may lead. And the data has, as we shall see, largely vindicated Christian moral teaching on sex and marriage. So the intellectual foundation for dissent on moral matters is collapsing.

The second problem with the dissenting agenda is that its moral laxity has been most disastrous for the most vulnerable members of our society: the poor. The poor have paid and continue to pay the highest price for the cultural revolution that Curran, Greeley, McBrien, and others would like the church to baptize.

Let me now offer a summary of the social scientific research on contraception and divorce that illuminates the problems with the accommodationist agenda.

### **Broken Connection**

In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI warned that the widespread use of contraception would lead to “conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality”; he also warned that man would lose respect for woman and “no longer [care] for her physical and psychological equilibrium”; rather, man would treat woman as a “mere instrument of selfish enjoyment, and no longer as his respected and beloved companion.” Why? By breaking the natural and divinely ordained connection between sex and procreation, women and especially men would focus on the hedonistic possibilities of sex and cease to see sex as something that was intrinsically linked to new life and to the sacrament of marriage.

In the United States, *Humanae Vitae* was the object of unprecedented dissent. Let me summarize the argument of one dissenter on this subject, Andrew Greeley, a priest, Jesuit, and professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. First, Greeley argued that Catholic teaching on contraception does not appreciate that married Catholics rely on sex for bonding, and they should not have to worry about bringing a baby into their lives when they bond.

Second, he claimed that the hierarchy is more concerned about keeping its power, by blindly following church tradition on contraception, than with helping ordinary people. “The problem is the arrogance of power that makes many church leaders insensitive to the problems of ordinary people and heedless of their needs—and of the Holy Spirit speaking through their experiences,” he declared in *The Catholic Myth*. He even went so far as to suggest that “[messing] around with the intimate lives of men and women to protect your own power is demonic.”

There we have it. The popes’ and bishops’ efforts to uphold the Christian tradition’s consensus against artificial contraception—stretching from the *Didache* in the first century, through such documents as Calvin’s *Commentary on Genesis* in the sixteenth century, to at least the Anglican bishops’ notorious decision in 1930—is legalistic, unrealistic, and demonic.

But on this topic, as on others, Greeley does not reconcile his polling data with what he knows the sociological data says about the consequences of widespread contraception in the United States. What does this data tell us? Well, scholars from Robert Michael at

Greeley's own University of Chicago to George Akerlof at the University of California at Berkeley argue that contraception played a central role in launching the sexual and divorce revolutions of the late twentieth century.

### **Contraceptive Losers**

Michael has argued that about half of the increase in divorce from 1965 to 1976 can be attributed to the “unexpected nature of the contraceptive revolution”—especially in the way that it made marriages less child-centered.<sup>1</sup> Akerlof argues that the availability first of contraception and then of abortion in the 1960s and 1970s was one of the crucial factors fueling the sexual revolution and the collapse of marriage among the working class and the poor.

I will focus on Akerlof's scholarship. George Akerlof is a Nobel prize-winning economist, a professor at Berkeley, and a former fellow at the Brookings Institution; he is not a conservative. In two articles in leading economic journals, Akerlof details findings and advances arguments that vindicate Paul VI's prophetic warnings about the social consequences of contraception for morality and men.<sup>2</sup>

In his first article, published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* in 1996, Akerlof began by asking why the United States witnessed such a dramatic increase in illegitimacy from 1965 to 1990—from 24 percent to 64 percent among African-Americans, and from 3 percent to 18 percent among whites. He noted that public health advocates had predicted that the widespread availability of contraception and abortion would reduce illegitimacy, not increase it. So what happened?

Using the language of economics, Akerlof pointed out that “technological innovation creates both winners and losers.” In this case the introduction of widespread effective contraception—especially the pill—put traditional women with an interest in marriage and children at “competitive disadvantage” in the relationship “market” compared to modern women who took a more hedonistic approach to sex and relationships. The contraceptive revolution also reduced the costs of sex for women and men, insofar as the threat of childbearing was taken off the table, especially as abortion became widely available in the 1970s.

The consequence? Traditional women could no longer hold the threat of pregnancy over their male partners, either to avoid sex or to elicit a promise of marriage in the event their partner made them pregnant. And modern women no longer worried about getting pregnant. Accordingly, more and more women (traditional as well as modern) gave in to their boyfriends' entreaties for sex.

In Akerlof's words, “the norm of premarital sexual abstinence all but vanished in the wake of the technology shock.” Women felt free or *obligated* to have sex before marriage. For instance, Akerlof finds that the percentage of girls 16 and under reporting sexual activity surged in 1970 and 1971 as contraception and abortion became common in many states throughout the country.

## **Immiserating Sex**

Thus, the sexual revolution left traditional or moderate women who wanted to avoid premarital sex or contraception “immiserated” because they could not compete with women who had no serious objection to premarital sex, and they could no longer elicit a promise of marriage from boyfriends in the event they got pregnant. Boyfriends, of course, could say that pregnancy was their girlfriends’ choice. So men were less likely to agree to a shotgun marriage in the event of a pregnancy than they would have been before the arrival of the pill and abortion.

Thus, many traditional women ended up having sex and having children out of wedlock, while many of the permissive women ended up having sex and contracepting or aborting so as to avoid childbearing. This explains in large part why the contraceptive revolution was associated with an increase in both abortion and illegitimacy.

In his second article, published in *The Economic Journal* in 1998, Akerlof argues that another key outworking of the contraceptive revolution was the disappearance of marriage—shotgun and otherwise—for men. Contraception and abortion allowed men to put off marriage, even in cases where they had fathered a child. Consequently, the fraction of young men who were married in the United States dropped precipitously. Between 1968 and 1993 the percentage of men 25 to 34 who were married with children fell from 66 percent to 40 percent. Accordingly, young men did not benefit from the domesticating influence of wives and children.

Instead, they could continue to hang out with their young male friends, and were thus more vulnerable to the drinking, partying, tomcatting, and worse that is associated with unsupervised groups of young men. Absent the domesticating influence of marriage and children, young men—especially men from working-class and poor families—were more likely to respond to the lure of the street. Akerlof noted, for instance, that substance abuse and incarceration more than doubled from 1968 to 1998. Moreover, his statistical models indicate that the growth in single men in this period was indeed linked to higher rates of substance abuse, arrests for violent crimes, and drinking.

From this research, Akerlof concluded by arguing that the contraceptive revolution played a key, albeit indirect, role in the dramatic increase in social pathology and poverty this country witnessed in the 1970s; it did so by fostering sexual license, poisoning the relations between men and women, and weakening the marital vow. In Akerlof’s words:

Just at the time, about 1970, that the permanent cure to poverty seemed to be on the horizon and just at the time that women had obtained the tools to control the number and the timing of their children, single motherhood and the feminization of poverty began their long and steady rise.

Furthermore, the decline in marriage caused in part by the contraceptive revolution “intensified . . . the crime shock and the substance abuse shock” that marked the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Falling on the Poor**

One pair of statistical trends illustrates the way in which the social pathologies of the late twentieth century fell disproportionately on the poor. About 5 percent of college-educated women now have a child outside marriage (little change since the 1960s), but about 20 percent of women with a high-school education or less now have a child outside marriage (up from 7 percent in the 1960s).

Why were family decline and attendant social pathologies concentrated among poor and working class Americans? Think of marriage as dependent upon two pillars: socioeconomic status and normative commitment. The poor have less of an economic stake in marriage, so they are more dependent on religious and moral norms regarding marriage. Middle-class and upper-class Americans remain committed to marriage in practice because they continue to have an economic and social stake in marriage. They recognize that their lifestyle, and the lifestyle of their children, will be markedly better if they combine their economic and social resources with one spouse.

So the bottom line is this: The research of Nobel-prize-winning economist George Akerlof suggests that the tragic outworkings of the contraceptive revolution were sexual license, family dissolution, crime, and poisoned relations between the sexes—and that the poor have paid the heaviest price for this revolution. This research suggests that the Catholic Church’s firm commitment to the moral law in the face of dramatic and widespread dissent from within and without is being vindicated in precincts that are not normally seen as sympathetic to Catholic teaching.

This research also suggests that the dissenting agenda advanced by people like Andrew Greeley amounts to a false compassion. Greeley is right to claim that the Holy Spirit speaks through people’s experiences; but a sober look at our experience with contraception reveals that the Catholic Church’s magisterium, and the Christian tradition it conveys, best advances the earthly happiness of men, women, and children, not contraception.

### **Disordering Divorce**

We have considered one of traditional Christianity’s most controversial moral teachings. I now turn to the issue of divorce and remarriage, where once again the church offers a sign of contradiction to the modern world. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* aptly summarizes the church’s teaching on divorce and remarriage:

Divorce is a grave offense against the natural law. Divorce is immoral . . . because it introduces disorder into the family and into society. This disorder brings grave harm to the deserted spouse, to children traumatized by the separation of their parents and often

torn between them, and because of its contagious effect, which makes it truly a plague on society.

The *Catechism* is making two central points: (1) divorce harms children, and (2) divorce is an infectious social plague that hurts the commonweal. For these reasons, among others, the church condemns divorce and prohibits remarriage.

The church's seemingly inflexible position on divorce also comes in for serious criticism from the dissenters. Notre Dame theology professor Richard McBrien, for instance, argues that the church's position makes no allowance for individuals whose marriage falls apart "despite the best efforts of all concerned." He further argues that this pope does not encourage "the way of compassion" in dealing with Catholics who have divorced and remarried, and does not acknowledge the "traditional Roman principle that laws are ideals to strive for and not standards one can realistically expect to achieve on a day-to-day basis."

So McBrien's argument, which echoes the arguments of mainline Protestants in the early twentieth century, boils down to this: The church should dispense with the moral law in an effort to be more compassionate to people in difficult situations. But what we have, once again, is false compassion.

This becomes clear when we take a careful look, once again, at the data. Numerous scholars—from Leora Friedberg at the University of Virginia to Nicholas Wolfinger at the University of Utah—have shown that divorce does in fact function as a social plague. Friedberg showed that passage of no-fault divorce laws in the 1970s accelerated the pace of divorce by about 17 percent between 1968 and 1988.<sup>3</sup> Wolfinger showed that a parental divorce increases the children's chance of later being divorced themselves by more than 50 percent, and is by far one of the most potent predictors of divorce.

We can see that Pope John Paul II is right when he says that divorce "has devastating consequences that spread in society like the plague." And we can see that McBrien's attempt to help people in difficult situations greatly increases the chance that their children will wind up in the same difficult situations, which in turn greatly increases their children's chances, and so on.

But I would like to focus on the other aspect of the church's teaching, namely, that divorce brings grave harm to children. I am going to focus on the research of Sara McLanahan, a professor of sociology at Princeton (and one of my advisors for my doctoral work there). Like Akerlof, McLanahan is no conservative. In the 1970s, as a divorced, single mother, she set out to show that the negative effects of divorce on children could be attributed solely to the economic dislocation it caused.

But after spending 20 years researching the subject, she came to the conclusion that the social and emotional consequences of divorce also played a key role in explaining the negative outcomes of divorce. She also found that remarriage was, on average, no help to children affected by divorce.

## Children's Benefits

In *Growing Up with a Single Parent*, written with her colleague Gary Sandefur of the University of Wisconsin, McLanahan argued that the intact, two-parent family does four key things for children.<sup>4</sup> First, children benefit from the economic resources that mothers and particularly fathers bring to the household through work and sometimes family money. Second, children see their parents model appropriate male-female relations, including virtues like fidelity and self-sacrifice in the context of a marital relationship.

Third, because both parents are invested in the child, they spell one another in caring for their children, and they monitor one another's parenting. This reduces stress, helps to insure that parents are not too strict or too permissive, and makes the intact family much more likely than other family arrangements to forestall abuse. Finally, fathers often serve as key guides to children seeking to negotiate the outside world as adolescents and young adults. Fathers introduce them to civic institutions and the world of work, and provide them with key contacts in these worlds.

McLanahan also argued that stepfathers do not have the history, the authority, and the trust of the children to function—on average—as well as biological fathers.

From the child's point of view, having a new adult move into the household creates another disruption. Having adjusted to the father's moving out, the child must now experience a second reorganization of household personnel. Stepfathers are less likely to be committed to the child's welfare than biological fathers, and they are less likely to serve as a check on the mother's behavior.

So what effects did she find? Children from divorced families are more likely to drop out of high school: Data from the National Survey of Families and Households showed that children in divorced families had a 17 percent risk of dropping out of school, compared to a 9 percent risk for children in married families, even after controlling for parents' education and race. Other surveys found similar results.

Girls raised in divorced families are more likely to have a nonmarital birth while in their teens: The National Survey of Families and Households showed this risk to be 15 percent for girls with divorced parents, compared to 9 percent for those with married parents. Again this survey is typical. McLanahan also found that boys raised outside of an intact nuclear family are more than twice as likely as other boys to end up in prison, even controlling for a range of social and economic factors.<sup>5</sup>

McLanahan also explored whether children in stepfamilies did better than children in single-mother families. Bear in mind that by the time she was conducting this latest round of research, she had remarried. Here is what she found: "Remarriage neither reduces nor improves a child's chances of graduating from high school or avoiding a teenage birth." In other words, remarriage *does not* mitigate the devastating social effects of divorce.

## **More Falls on the Poor**

The final point I would like to make about the divorce revolution is that it has fallen, once again, disproportionately on the shoulders of the most vulnerable members of our society. My own research with the National Survey of Families and Households indicates that married couples with a high-school diploma or less education have a 19 percent higher risk of divorce than married couples with a college degree. Other studies show that poor and working-class married couples are much more likely to divorce than are middle- and upper-class married couples.

So, after spending 20 years researching the effects of family structure on children, McLanahan came to this conclusion in *Growing Up with a Single Parent*:

If we were asked to design a system for making sure that children's basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two-parent ideal. Such a design, in theory, would not only ensure that children had access to the time and money of two adults, it also would provide a system of checks and balances that promoted quality parenting. The fact that both parents have a biological connection to the child would increase the likelihood that the parents would identify with the child and be willing to sacrifice for that child, and it would reduce the likelihood that either parent would abuse the child.

This, of course, sounds quite similar to the perennial wisdom of the Christian moral tradition, articulated by figures as various as John Paul II, Calvin, and St. Thomas Aquinas.

## **Hopeful Notes**

The portrait I have painted is sobering. But I would like to conclude on two hopeful notes. We are beginning to see a new openness among intellectuals to the importance of marriage and to the perils of divorce. For a long time, intellectuals were not willing to acknowledge the importance of marriage for children. But the intellectual tide is now turning towards a refreshing willingness to grapple with our children's toughest social problems in a probing and open-minded manner.

Besides Akerlof and McLanahan, scholars like Linda Waite at the University of Chicago, Robert Lerman at the Urban Institute, Isabel Sawhill at the Brookings Institution, and Norval Glenn at the University of Texas have all underlined the importance of marriage in recent years. Their willingness to speak up on behalf of the unvarnished truth—the truth written on our hearts, and the truth evident for all to see in our statistical models—suggests that the intellectual foundations of dissent are crumbling before our very eyes.

Second, there is a new openness among Evangelical Protestant scholars and leaders to the truth and wisdom of the ancient Christian teaching against contraception. Among others, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Seminary, Reformed Theological

Seminary professor Harold O. J. Brown, and Evangelical theologian J. I. Packer have raised serious concerns about the moral permissibility and social consequences of contraception. For instance, in a recent symposium on contraception in *First Things*, Mohler wrote:

Thirty years of sad experience demonstrate that *Humanae Vitae* [correctly] sounded the alarm, warning of a contraceptive mentality that would set loose immeasurable evil as modern birth control methods allowed seemingly risk-free sex outside the integrity of the marital bond. At the same time, it allowed married couples to completely sever the sex act from procreation, and God's design for the marital bond. . . . Standing against the spirit of the age, evangelicals and Roman Catholics must affirm that children are God's good gifts and blessings to the marital bond. Further, we must affirm that marriage falls short of God's design when husband and wife are not open to the gift and stewardship of children.

This intellectual opening, itself a product of Evangelical Protestants' growing appreciation of the ways in which the contraceptive mentality is connected to dramatic increases in sexual promiscuity, divorce, and abortion, represents an important opportunity for orthodox Protestants and Catholics to work together in recovering and rehabilitating Christian moral teaching about sex and the family.

Faithful Christian scholars need to seize this moment, and underline the intellectual power and coherence of Christian moral teaching to Christian colleges and universities, congregations, pastors, and the public square. Above all else, we need to drive home the point that social justice cannot be divorced from Christian moral teaching. More than anyone else, the poor have been devastated by the outworkings of the sexual revolution of the last forty years.

We must make it crystal clear that the church's commitment to the poor requires nothing less than a vigorous proclamation of the church's true and beautiful teaching about sex and marriage. In other words, we must make it clear that the preferential option for the poor begins in the home.

*"The Facts of Life & Marriage"* is based on a paper he delivered to the 2004 meeting of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars ([www.catholicsscholars.org](http://www.catholicsscholars.org)).

The text of *Humanae Vitae* can be found at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html).

**Notes:**

1. Talk given at an Emory University family conference in March 2003.

2. George Akerlof, Janet L. Yellen, and Michael L. Katz, “An Analysis of Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing in the United States,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* CXI (1996); George Akerlof, “Men Without Children,” *The Economic Journal* 108 (1998).
3. See Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (Broadway Books), p. 179; Margaret F. Brinig and F. H. Buckley, “No-Fault Laws and At-Fault People,” *International Review of Law and Economics* 18 (1998), pp. 325–340.
4. Harvard University Press, 1994.
5. Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, “Father Absence and Youth Incarceration,” delivered at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1998.

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