

## WHEN CATHOLIC PRIESTS DISSENTED

*By Caroline Kitchener*

As a vacancy on the Supreme Court calls into question the future of abortion rights in America, *Humanae Vitae* just passed its 50th anniversary. That seminal papal text outlines the Catholic Church's opposition to forms of birth control such as condoms and the pill, and continues to be one of the most divisive texts in Catholic theology. Just 8 percent of [American](#) Catholics—and 22 percent of Catholics worldwide—support the Church's position on birth control, according to polling from 2016.

Fifty years ago today, 52 priests in the Washington area signed a sharply worded dissent to *Humanae Vitae*, which was quickly reprinted in major media outlets around the country. Chet Delaney, a Masthead member, was one of those priests. With his help, I've spent the past few weeks interviewing Church historians and estranged Catholic priests, and digging through the archives at the Catholic University of America, learning about the priests known as the "Washington 50." Many of them, including Delaney, left the priesthood over the incident. The scale and vigor of their dissent highlights the absence of a comparable protest by Catholic clergy in the years since. And that's no accident, according to the scholars I spoke to. The Vatican's firm response to the dissenters set a precedent that endures to this day. "Catholic priests seem to have reverted to a very conservative stance," Delaney said. But 50 years ago, he and his colleagues had "no choice" but to resist.

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After Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, the text arrived in Washington, D.C., in fragments. Gathered in Caldwell Hall at Catholic University, a group of 10 prominent priests and theologians [received](#) the document, section by section, from *The Washington Post*. By 9 o'clock, they had the full statement.

"As soon as we realized it was an absolute mandate against contraception, we knew we had to blow up the ship," said Daniel Maguire, a priest and former theology professor at Marquette University. On an old, rickety typewriter, Maguire and other theologians typed out a letter of dissent, then stayed on the phone with a host of Catholic leaders until 3:30 in the morning, urging them to sign on. "It was a very dramatic moment," Maguire told me. "And of course it's changed everything since."

A contingent of the Association of Washington Priests, a group of clergy in the D.C. area, signed on with the initial group of theologians. Together, the 52 priests asserted that Catholic couples should be able to rely on their own good judgement to decide whether or not to use birth control. The priests' position was not that the pope lacked the authority to issue an encyclical like *Humanae Vitae*, or even that birth control was necessarily a good thing. Rather, they argued for "the right of every Catholic to a responsible conscience." It was a "time-honored principle of Catholic tradition," they wrote in a subsequent letter, "that the conscience is the proximate norm of morality." If individuals fundamentally disagreed with the encyclical, they should not have to follow it. The debate, Maguire told me, centered on a question that extended far beyond the issue of contraception: How much authority did the Church have over the daily lives of the laity? Could Catholics be compelled, no matter what, to submit?

Delaney signed the dissent right away, fully aware that the consequences would be severe. "You knew that if you put your name on that paper, your name was going to be published for everyone to see," Delaney told me. Growing up in the Catholic enclaves of South Bend, Indiana—home of University of Notre Dame—and the "Irish South Side" of Chicago, Delaney told me, "you couldn't do anything better than become a priest." After he was ordained, his mother told him that throughout his childhood, she'd prayed every night that one day he'd join the Church. "So for her, this was a terrible blow." When *The Washington Post* printed the name of every dissenting priest on the front page, Delaney's mother disowned him. Several close friends stopped returning his calls.

# The Washington Post

Times Herald

4

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Pope Paul: "Not ours, but the law of God."

United Press International

## Pope's Ban Binding, Cardinal Declares; 52 Priests Disagree

By Robert G. Kaiser

Washington Post Staff Writer

Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle told Catholics in the Washington area yesterday that they are "bound in conscience to accept and to follow" Pope Paul's encyclical forbidding the use of birth-control devices.

However, 52 members of the Washington Association of Priests issued a statement yesterday saying, in effect, that they disagreed. The 52 priests did not accept Cardinal O'Boyle's view that the birth-control issue is now closed, but said that husbands and wives might sometimes use birth-control devices "according to their conscience."

The Pope himself, meanwhile, took the unusual step of defending his encyclical for a second time. But he said that he understood the widespread opposition to it.

The Pope clarified his position before thousands of followers who jammed the courtyard of his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Saturday. Regarding his decision not to relax Catholic doctrine against birth control, the Pope said:

"It is not a rule that ignores sociological and democratic conditions of our time and it is



CARDINAL O'BOYLE

... "do without dissent"

not in itself opposed—as some seem to think—to a reasonable limitation of birth, nor to scientific research and therapeutic cures..."

But the Pope in no way modified his position, and he emphasized the importance of following his guidance: "We want once again to recall this is not ours, but the law of God."

Acknowledging the criticism of his encyclical, "Of Human Life," the Pontiff said it had also provoked much praise.

See BIRTH A2, Col. 1

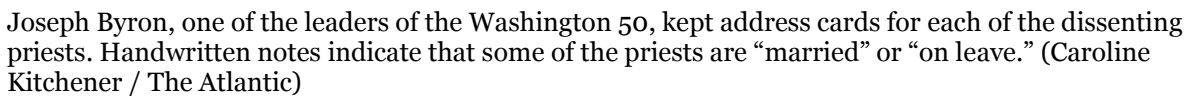
On August 5, one week after *Humanae Vitae* was issued, *The Washington Post* printed a front-page story about the priests' dissent. (Caroline Kitchener / *The Atlantic*)

After the dissent was published, Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle, who oversaw the Archdiocese of Washington, reminded all the pastors in the area of their duty to convey and support the Vatican's position on birth control. At the next mass, Delaney was told he would not be delivering the sermon. As he got changed for the service at the back of the Church, Delaney said, the space "was filled with fear."

A formal warning soon followed. O'Boyle sent an 11-page letter to every dissenting priest in the diocese. It outlined the failings of the priests'

statement, arguing that the pope's word should trump any individual's conscience, "even if [the individual] thinks he has studied the matter more carefully than the Pope and even if he is confident that his experience, or intelligence, or holiness, enable him to know better than the Pope what Christ wants." For the dissenting priests, that idea was antithetical to the Church as they understood it. In an act of defiance, one of the dissenters read the letter aloud at Sunday mass. O'Boyle expelled him from the clergy and issued a public warning to the remaining 51: Retract the dissent, or receive the same punishment.

What happened next, Maguire told me, permanently changed the nature of Catholic dissent. Instead of complying with the cardinal's request, the priests gathered for a private mass at the time of the deadline. "A new clergy has emerged," reported CBS. "A clergy that rebels against autocratic control." In Washington, D.C., crowds rallied in public support of the Washington 50. Nonetheless, O'Boyle revoked the credentials of 39 priests. They could no longer hear confession or preach at mass. Many were asked to move out of their church-provided housing. "They lost everything," Delaney said.



Delaney ultimately concluded that he could not continue to be a priest. “I no longer wanted to represent what the Church had come to stand for,” he said. With no job, no future plans, and a family that refused to speak to him, Delaney had trouble even finding money for food. Some priests decided to stay and fight the system from within, but they didn’t fare much better. After a judicial process that stretched out over more than two years, they were told that, unless they publicly agreed that Vatican authority trumps an individual’s conscience, O’Boyle’s decision would stand.

There has not been a comparable act of clerical dissent in the 50 years since, said Gerald Fogarty, a professor of Christian history at the University of Virginia. Catholic priests today, he said, are generally much more reluctant to disagree with the Vatican. No prominent Catholic clergy have come out in support of abortion rights during the current political fight over the Supreme Court, for instance. “There has been a tremendous silence on all issues of contraception,” Maguire said. “It’s not like the ’60s anymore, when we could get hundreds of [Catholic leaders] to come out. Priests today will just quietly let it happen.” Maguire attributes what he calls “the great settling down” directly to the aftermath of *Humanae Vitae*. Other priests saw what happened to the Washington 50, he said, and assumed other strains of dissent would end the same way.

For years, Delaney struggled to fill the gaping void the Church left in his life. He got close to friends in a new social circle. He learned to teach computer classes. He became a voracious reader of spy novels (“Not the Sherlock Holmes kind—the ones with lots of action”). Eventually, his mother started speaking to him again. Delaney says he’s proud to have challenged Church authority at such an important moment. While subsequent generations of priests haven’t followed the lead of the Washington 50, Maguire said, the priests’ dissent may have prompted a shift in how regular Catholics view Vatican authority. “The old saying used to be, *roma locuta, causa finita*: ‘Rome has spoken, the case is closed,’” he explained. “This was us saying, ‘Rome has spoken, Rome is wrong, the debate has begun.’”