

[Opinion](#)

[Letters to the Editor](#)

by NCR Staff

[View Author Profile](#)

## [Join the Conversation](#)

February 17, 2023

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Controversy over the Pontifical Academy for Life's book that challenges church teaching on contraception shows why conservative Catholics are so concerned about this issue, [say ethicists Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler](#).

---

Salzman and Lawler's article is one of the clearest I've seen on the roots of topics that roil through church discussions/arguments these days. So much of morality comes down to methods or ways of discerning what is right and not so right at little bit wrong and just wrong.

The act/objective/law model, "the church says it and that's it," "the Bible says it and that's it," "it's in the Catechism" is one way of knowing and living truth. This becomes the idea that marriage is mainly for procreation with a small nod to the union of the couple is a primary good of marriage. The rules are the rules and must be followed.

The interpersonal union model, says the meanings of marriage are multiple, and these multiple meanings have to be taken into account when discerning how to live our lives. The rules are to be considered and applied with freedom rooted in love of God and neighbor. Morality, sexual and social, is much more a recipe than an unbending rulebook.



Many seem to see the wisdom and worth of the interpersonal model when applying Catholic social teaching on matters of everything from just wages to immigration to the death penalty. But for some the interpersonal model doesn't apply to matters of sexual morality.

This article helps us understand the underlying cultural meanings undergirding much of what gets argued about on other levels of discourse. Knowing what models inform our understandings and choices is crucial to adult faith formation and the informed conscience supported practice of our faith.

**(Fr.) RICK MALLOY, SJ**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

\*\*\*

Correct me if I am mistaken, but using Cicero's (106-43BCE) formulation of natural law as "a true law, a right reason, conformable to nature, universal, unchanging, eternal, whose commands urge us to duty, and whose prohibitions restrain us from evil" would serve us far better in addressing the issues central to *Humanae Vitae* than any appeal to papal infallibility.

As a vote of confidence in human reason in conformity with human nature, Cicero was echoing the certainty of Stoicism, declaring that the universe is informed in its nature and behavior by reason functioning as law. Whoever disobeys this true law "flies from himself and does violence to the very nature of man." Acting in compliance with this law, humans are acting as humans ought, not can, act. In this

regard, Aquinas' discussion of practical reason was long anticipated by the Stoics when they said, "the individual mind is a 'seed' of reason and the purpose of an individual life is a progressive grasp of, and adaptation to the overall purposes of the universe."

Referred to as an "ethical cosmopolitanism," this implies that all human beings are by nature citizens of one world, divided only by contrived cultural custom and religious belief. Given that contraception is both a religious and secular controversy, with some justices on the Supreme Court threatening to pursue the overturn of *Griswold v. Connecticut*, an ethical cosmopolitanism offers greater hope of society-wide resolution than the rather idiosyncratic concept of papal infallibility, now mired over contraception in internecine theological conflict within Catholicism.

**T. PATRICK HILL**  
**Winchester, Virginia**

Advertisement

\*\*\*

In the informative article, a very intriguing quote was used in Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* to justify individual conscience as an endorsement of artificial contraception.

Before even diving into *Amoris Laetitia*, the article first trots out the reasoning of "majority rule" and even encourages readers to tweet about it. I was surprised to learn that NCR would succumb to the same line of reasoning that school children use to excuse their rowdy behavior "But all the other kids in class do it too, therefore the matter is settled."

Now onto the quote in the article, which is reproduced here:

Nowhere in *Amoris Laetitia* does Francis cite *Humanae Vitae*'s absolute condemnation of artificial contraception, which he would certainly have done if this was an infallible teaching. Instead, following traditional Catholic teaching, he promotes responsible parenthood and the authority and inviolability of a well-formed conscience, citing *Gaudium et Spes*.

Please read *Amoris Laetitia*, and you will plainly see that Pope Francis cites *Humanae Vitae* and several documents from St. Pope John Paul II in addition to *Gaudium et Spes*.

Every decision we make is our own, the buck stops with us, but in every decision as Catholics we have a consultant and advisor that offers her best practices and edifying cautions, our dear mother church. As Catholics we form our own conscience, but it is a conscience that is forever being accompanied by our Roman Catholic Church.

In the case of artificial contraception, what has been stated by St. Augustine is apropos here: "Rome has spoken, the matter is settled."

## **KALEL DIAS**

**Miami, Florida**

\*\*\*

No discussion of this article and Pope Paul VI's papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, would be complete without mentioning in more detail the papal birth control commission, originally created by Pope John XXIII during the Second Vatican Council and encouraged further by his successor, Pope Paul VI.

We learn that, at its inception, it was composed of clergy, medical doctors, psychologists, population experts and social scientists; later joined by three prominent Catholic couples with much experience in child rearing, among them Pat and Patty Crowley, co-founders of the then extremely popular Christian Family Movement. Included is a [very telling NCR summary](#) of the Crowleys and their transformative experience during those sessions in Rome leading up to Pope Paul's final, questionable judgment in *Humanae Vitae*.

And I quote from the above clip: "The Crowley's presented the results of a sociological survey of married couples that they had authorized. It revealed how painful (and unsuccessful) most Catholic couples found the practice of rhythm, the church's sole approved method of birth control."

In Catholic parishes of the '60s there were always several large families of 8-10 children parented by college educated, professional people without financial concerns; families idealized by their fellow parishioners. And then there were other

couples that tried to emulate the church mandated ideal, but were financially and psychologically not up to the task with resulting alcoholism, domestic abuse, philandering husbands and eventual divorce. It was heartbreaking to witness.

While war scarred veterans of World War II and Vietnam in the '60s and '70s found a place to confide their horrific experiences at VFW halls, Catholic women of that era discussed their own stresses from using the "rhythm method" with kindred spirits at neighborhood coffee hours; some of them pregnant at the time with "rhythm babies."

Counseling with progressive clergy members, some eventually followed their consciences and found other ways to limit their families, ways that, while considered by the church to be intrinsically evil, nevertheless, saved their sanity, their marriages and infused new life into their families. Santo Subito Patty Crowley!

**NANCY McGUNAGLE**

**Kalispell, Montana**