

Proposal

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Panel “Historicizing the “post-Vatican II””

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“Moreover, the practice has not changed. Women continued to take the pill, afterwards as before” : *Humanae Vitae*, an earthquake for believers?

Published in July 1968, Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* – Of Human Life – is described in the scientific literature as an “earthquake” for Catholics. Three years after the Council's postponed discussions and a report of the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control, the Pope expressly condemned contraception, declared any so-called “artificial” method of birth control “intrinsically dishonest”. *Humanae Vitae* came as a surprise because of the gap between Church's more traditional positions and public opinion in favor of a relaxation of morality: it was perceived as anachronistic by its contemporaries.

A deacon, married for 50 years, explains : “Moreover, the practice has not changed. Women continued to take the pill, afterwards as before”. As the heir to a century of thinking on reproduction, *Humanae Vitae* would have caused a silent rupture. The present contribution intends to highlight, from the Belgian case, the muted contestation against the ban on birth control in a context of liberation of morals. Indeed, based on a bottom-up approach by archives material and interviews with actors in family pastoral and marriage preparation, it is possible to see the nuances of this rupture between believers and the magisterium. It seems that Catholics who took advantage of the post-conciliar vacuum by using mechanical and chemical methods of birth control did not stop with the doctrine promulgation. Was a protest already over?

I thus analyze the gap between the hopes, disappointments and joys generated by this two-step turnaround, as well as the techniques of agency and compromise that emerged along the way. The tight Belgian ecclesial network allows us to see, through the play of scales, the circulation of morality practices and theory between the Vatican, the bishops, the priests, and the believers. I thus wonder about the possibility of making a *religious history of sexualities* by verifying whether the reversal of *Humanae Vitae* is really a post-conciliar earthquake.