A Commentary on the Canadian Bishops’ Statement on the
Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*
(1968)

*by Msgr. Vincent Foy*

**Preface**

After the Winnipeg Statement was made public, Cardinal O’Boyle of Washington, who was hosting a meeting of the US Bishops, asked me to write this commentary on the Canadian Winnipeg Statement. This I did and it included the document mentioned above. Every American Bishop was given a copy. I also sent a copy to the Holy Father and was thanked in his name by the Secretary of State, Cardinal Cicognani. In addition, I sent a copy to every Canadian Bishop and to all of the English-speaking Bishops of the world. This commentary was never published.
Your Grace or Excellency,

Enclosed is a commentary on the Canadian Bishops’ Statement on the Encyclical “Humanae Vitae”. It is not written from any position of authority and of course may be freely disregarded. However, it does quote other voices which I think deserve a thoughtful hearing. Nor do I think it inexact to say that a great uneasiness has come over hundreds of priests and countless thousands of the laity in Canada as a result of the Winnipeg Statement.

In full submission and loyalty and with sincere regards, I am

Respectfully yours in Christ,

[signature]

(Rt. Rev.) Vincent N. Foy,
Parish Priest
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A COMMENTARY ON THE CANADIAN BISHOPS’ STATEMENT ON THE ENCYCLICAL “HUMANAE VITAE”

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CANADIAN BISHOPS’ STATEMENT ON THE ENCYCLICAL “HUMANAE VITAE”

(The text of the statement on Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical Letter “Humanae Vitae,” issued by the Bishops of Canada, Sept. 27, 1968, at their Plenary Assembly held at St. Boniface-Winnipeg, Canada)

1. Pope Paul VI in his recent encyclical “On Human Life” has spoken on a profound human problem as is clearly evidenced by the immediate and universal reaction to his message. It is evident that he has written out of concern and love, and in a spirit of service to all mankind. Conscious of the current controversy and deep differences of opinion as to how to harmonize married love and the responsible transmission of life, we, the Canadian bishops, offer our help to the priests and Catholic people believing it to be their pastoral duty.

I - Solidarity with the Pope

2. We are in accord with the teaching of the Holy Father concerning the dignity of married life, and the necessity of a truly Christian relationship between conjugal love and responsible parenthood. We share the pastoral concern which has led him to offer counsel and direction in an area which, while controverted, could hardly be more important to human happiness.

3. By divine commission clarification of these difficult problems of morality is required from the teaching authority of the Church (1). The Canadian Bishops will endeavor to discharge their obligation to the best of their ability. In this pursuit we are acting consistently with our recent submissions to the federal government on contraception, divorce and abortion, nor is there anything in those submissions which does not harmonize with the encyclical.

II - Solidarity with the Faithful

4. In the same spirit of solidarity we declare ourselves one with the People of God in the difficulties they experience in understanding, making their own, and living this teaching.

5. In accord with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the recent encyclical (2) recognizes the nobility of conjugal love which is “uniquely expressed and perfected through the marital act” (3). Many married people experience a truly agonizing difficulty in reconciling the need to express conjugal love with the responsible transmission of human life. (4)
6. This difficulty is recognized in deep sympathy and is shared by bishops and priests as counselors and confessors in their service of the faithful. We know that we are unable to provide easy answers to this difficult problem made more acute by the great variety of solutions proposed in an open society.

7. A clearer understanding of these problems and progress toward their solution will result from a common effort in dialogue, research and study on the part of all, laity, priests and bishops, guided by faith and sustained by grace. To this undertaking the Canadian bishops pledge themselves.

   III - Christian Conscience and Divine Law

8. Of recent years many have entertained doubts about the validity of arguments proposed to forbid any positive intervention which would prevent the transmission of human life. As a result there have arisen opinions and practices contrary to traditional moral theology. Because of this many had been expecting official confirmation of their views. This helps to explain the negative reaction the encyclical received in many quarters. Many Catholics face a grave problem of conscience.

9. Christian theology regarding conscience has its roots in the teaching of St. Paul (5). This has been echoed in our day by Vatican II: “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths.” (6) “On his part man acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God for whom he was created” (7). The dignity of man consists precisely in his ability to achieve his fulfillment in God through the exercise of a knowing and free choice.

10. However this does not exempt a man from the responsibility of forming his conscience according to truly Christian values and principles. This implies a spirit of openness to the teaching of the church which is an essential aspect of the Christian’s baptismal vocation. It likewise implies sound personal motivation free from selfishness and undue external pressure which are incompatible with the spirit of Christ. Nor will he succeed in this difficult task without the help of God. Man is prone to sin and evil and unless he humbly asks and gratefully receives the grace of God this basic freedom will inevitably lead to abuse.

   IV - Teaching Office of the Church
11. Belief in the Church which is the prolongation of Christ in the world, belief in the Incarnation, demands a cheerful readiness to hear that Church to whose first apostles Christ said: “He who hears you hears me” (8). True freedom of conscience does not consist, then, in the freedom to do as one likes, but rather to do as a responsible conscience directs.

12. Vatican Council II applies this concept forcefully. Christians “Therefore must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself and should be submissive towards the Church’s teaching office which authentically interprets that law in the light of the gospel. That divine law reveals and protects the integral meaning of conjugal love and impels it towards truly human fulfillment.” (9).

13. Today, the Holy Father has spoken on the question of morally acceptable means to harmonize conjugal love and responsible parenthood. Christians must examine in all honesty their reaction to what he has said.

14. The Church is competent to hand on the truth contained in the revealed word of God and to interpret its meaning. But its role is not limited to this function. In his pilgrimage to salvation, man achieves final happiness by all his human conduct and his whole moral life. Since the Church is man’s guide in this pilgrimage, she is called upon to exercise her role as teacher, even in those matters which do not demand the absolute assent of faith.

15. Of this sort of teaching Vatican II wrote: “This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking ex cathedra. That is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme teaching service is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will” (10).

16. It follows that those who have been commissioned by the Church to teach in her name will recognize their responsibility to refrain from public opposition to the encyclical; to do otherwise would compound confusion and be a source of scandal to God’s people. However, this must not be interpreted as a restriction on the legitimate and recognized freedom of theologians to pursue loyalty and conscientiously their research with a view to greater depth and clarity in the teaching of the Church.
17. It is a fact that a certain number of Catholics, although admittedly subject to the teaching of the encyclical, find it either extremely difficult or even impossible to make their own all elements of this doctrine. In particular, the argumentation and rational foundation of the encyclical, which are only briefly indicated, have failed in some cases to win the assent of men of science, or indeed of some men of culture and education who share in the contemporary empirical and scientific mode of thought. We must appreciate the difficulty experienced by contemporary man in understanding and appropriating some of the points of this encyclical, and we must make every effort to learn from the insights of Catholic scientists and intellectuals, who are of undoubted loyalty to Christian truth, to the Church and to the authority of the Holy See. Since they are not denying any point of divine and Catholic faith nor rejecting the teaching authority of the Church, these Catholics should not be considered or consider themselves, shut off from the body of the faithful. But they should remember that their good faith will be dependent on a sincere self-examination to determine the true motives and grounds for such suspension of assent and on continued effort to understand and deepen their knowledge of the teaching of the Church.

18. The difficulties of this situation have been felt by the priests of the Church, and by many others. We have been requested to provide guidelines to assist them. This we will endeavor to accomplish in a subsequent document. We are conscious that continuing dialogue, study and reflection will be required by all members of the Church in order to meet as best we can the complexities and exigencies of the problem.

19. We point out that the particular norms which we may offer will prove of little value unless they are placed in the context of man’s human and Christian vocation and all of the values of Christian marriage. This formation of conscience and this education in true love will be achieved only by a well balanced pastoral insistence upon the primary importance of love which is human, total, faithful and exclusive as well as generously faithful (11).

V - Preliminary Pastoral Guidance

20. For the moment, in conformity with traditional Christian morality, we request priests and all who may be called to guide or counsel the consciences of others to give their attention to the following considerations.

21. The pastoral directives given by Pope Paul VI in the encyclical are inspired by a positive sacramental approach. The Eucharist is always the great expression of Christian love and
union. Married couples will always find in this celebration a meeting place with the Lord which will never fail to strengthen their own mutual love. With regard to the sacrament of penance the spirit is one of encouragement both for penitents and confessor and avoids both extremes of laxity and rigorism.

22. The encyclical suggests an attitude towards the sacrament of penance which is at once less juridical, more pastoral and more respectful of persons. There is real concern for their growth, however slow at times, and for the hope of the future.

23. Confession should never be envisaged under the cloud of agonizing fear or severity. It should be an exercise in confidence and respect of consciences. Paul VI invited married couples to “…have recourse with humble perseverance to the mere; of God, which is poured forth in the Sacrament of Penance’ (1). Confession is a meeting between a sincere conscience and Christ Our Lord who was “indeed intransigent with evil, but merciful towards individuals” (13).

24. Such is the general atmosphere in which the confessor and counsellor must work. We complete the concept with a few more particular applications.

25. In the situation we described earlier in this statement (par. 17) the confessor or counsellor must show sympathetic understanding and reverence for the sincere good faith of those who fall in their effort to accept some point of the encyclical.

26. Counsellors may meet others who, accepting the teaching of the Holy Father, find that because of particular circumstances they are involved in what seems to them a clear conflict of duties, e.g., the reconciling of conjugal love and responsible parenthood with the education of children already born or with the health of the mother. In accord with the accepted principles of moral theology, if these persons have tried sincerely but without success to pursue a line of conduct in keeping with the given directives, they may be safely assured that, whoever honestly chooses that course which seems right to him does so in good conscience.

27. Good pastoral practice for other and perhaps more difficult cases will be developed in continuing communication among bishops, priests and laity, and in particular in the document we have promised to prepare. In the meantime we earnestly solicit the help of medical scientists and biologists in their research into human fertility. While it would be an
illusion to hope for the solution of all human problems through scientific technology, such research can bring effective help to the alleviation and solution of problems of conscience in this area.

VI - Invitation to Social Pastoral Action

28. The whole world is conscious of the growing preoccupation with the social impact of all men’s thoughts, words and actions. Sexuality in all its aspects is obviously an area of the greatest human and social impact. The norms and values which govern this so vital human concern merit the attention and cooperation of all. Our world evolves at a frightening rate, creating at once a vivid sense of unity and a set of conflicting forces which could destroy us.

29. This concern will be fruitful only if it leads all of us to recognize our true human worth in the possession of our inner powers by which we are distinctively ourselves with the full recognition of our complementary sexual differences on the physical, the psychological and the spiritual plane. Only in this manner will we achieve marriages that are truly unions of love in the service of life.

30. To this end there must be brought into play all the positive forces of the family, the school, the state, the Church. No one may stand aloof, nor are there really national boundaries in a matter of such universal application. With this in mind we call on all members of the Church to realize on every level from the very youngest to the various possibilities of adult education.

31. Without wishing to specify in detail we single out for special mention a few aspects which may have richer possibilities. We place first the dialogue and cooperation, which have been so encouraging, among all members of the Church and, through the ecumenical movement with other Churches.

32. We note with deep satisfaction the spread and strength of so many activities calculated to prepare for marriage or to deepen the appreciation of married persons of this sublime state. For example, marriage preparation courses, family apostolates, discussion groups, etc.

33. Educators, too, are to be commended for their growing attention to the question. Everywhere the problem of sex education and family life is being studied. And this education is happily being deepened by scientific research and diffused through the creative use of mass media.
Nothing less than this mobilization of all human forces will suffice to meet the challenge of divisive and destructive forces which begin deep in the willful selfishness of man and inhibit the true expression of his love. We pledge ourselves to the pastoral priority of encouraging and promoting these programs whenever and wherever possible.

34. We conclude by asking all to pray fervently that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide his Church through all darkness and suffering. We, the People of God, cannot escape this hour of crisis but there is no reason to believe that it will create division and despair. The unity of the Church does not consist in a bland conformity in all ideas, but rather in a union of faith and heart, in submission to God’s will and a humble but honest and ongoing search for the truth. That unity of love and faith is founded in Christ and as long as we are true to Him nothing can separate us. We stand in union with the Bishop of Rome the successor of Peter, the sign and contributing cause of our unity with Christ and with one another. But this very union postulates such a love of the Church that we can do no less than to place all of our love and all of our intelligence at its service. If this sometimes means that in our desire to make the Church more intelligible and more beautiful we must, as pilgrims do, falter in the way or differ as to the way, no one should conclude that our common faith is lost or our loving purpose blunted. The great Cardinal Newman once wrote: “Lead kindly light amidst the encircling gloom We believe that the Kindly Light will lead us to a greater understanding of the ways of God and the love of man.”

FOOTNOTES

(1) On Human Life, n. 4 & 18
(2) On Human Life, n. 8
(3) The Church Today, n. 49
(4) The Church Today, n. 51
(5) Rom. 14:23 and I Cor. 10
(6) The Church Today, n. 16
(7) On Religious Freedom, n. 3; the Church Today, nn. 16, 17
(8) Luke 10:16 (9) Const. on the Church, n. 50
(10) Constitution on the Church, n. 25
(11) On Human Life, n. 9
(12) On Human Life, n. 25
(13) On Human Life, n. 29
INTRODUCTORY REMARK

The text of the Winnipeg Statement reproduced in this brochure is taken from “Our Sunday Visitor”, Canadian edition, Oct. 20th, 1968. This is a necessary remark because it will be noted that Paragraph 6 was omitted by typographical error from the Statement as it appeared in many Catholic papers and texts distributed to priests throughout Canada. In one text, at least, the paragraph numbering was incorrect. I hope this will eliminate any misunderstanding when paragraph numbers are quoted.

THE SETTING: REMOTE

1. The Essence of a Revealed Religion is Authority

This is a first principle from which other criteria flow to avoid, by God’s plan, a Church which might otherwise develop into a Tower of Babel in matters of faith and morals. Cardinal Newman has been often quoted on the primacy of conscience but he recognized that this primacy was not an unlimited supremacy and must be properly understood. He stated:

“It must be borne in mind that, as the essence of all religion is authority and obedience, so the distinction between natural religion and revealed religion lies in this. One has a subjective authority, the other an objective --- the supremacy of conscience is the essence of natural religion; the supremacy of apostle, or Pope, or Church, or bishop is the essence of revealed religion. And when such external authority is taken away, the mind falls back of necessity upon the inward guide which it possessed even before revelation was vouchsafed.” (quoted from the Tablet, Dec. 2nd, 1967, p. 1269).

In answer to Luther’s exaggerated subjectivism St. Thomas More said: “Why is it not reasonable to believe certain truths only on the authority of the Church, since we accept the Gospels themselves only on that same authority?” (from “An Answer to Martin Luther”)

A greater authority than Cardinal Newman or St. Thomas More has expressed it in this way, referring to current over-estimation of subjective criteria: “What would happen to law, authority, the community, if there were not the cult of obedience? And in the ecclesiastical field, what
would happen to unity of faith and of charity, if a concurrence of will, guaranteed by an authorized power, itself obedient to the superior will of God, did not propose and demand harmony of thought and of action?” (Public address of Pope Paul VI entitled “Obedience to the Church Essential”, L’Osservatore Romano, Oct. 24th, 1968, p. 1).

2. Lest We Forget

Professor John T. Noonan wrote: “No Catholic writer before 1963 had asserted that the general prohibition of contraception was wrong.” (“Contraception”, Belknap Press, Harvard, 1965, p. 512). On Dec. 31st, 1930, following the Lambeth Conference of the same year in which the Anglican Church deviated from its traditional rejection of artificial contraception, Pope Pius XI reaffirmed in his Encyclical “Casti Connubii”, “uninterrupted Christian tradition”. This tradition has been traced in many manuals. Many taught that the condemnation of artificial contraception in “Casti Connubii” was an ex Cathedra pronouncement (e.g. Vermeersch, 1931; Cappello, 1933 and others). Some taught that the encyclical of Pius XI was clearly declaring a truth already infallibly taught by the Catholic Church (e.g. Creusen, 1932; Zalba and Cartechini, 1951). In 1963 Fathers John C. Ford, S.J. and Gerlad Kelly, S.J. published the results of a survey of ranking moral theologians throughout the world since 1930 (Contemporary Moral Theology, Vol. II, Chapter 13). The results of the survey can be summed up in these words: “A competent survey of leading authorities released in 1963 disclosed that a clear majority of moral theologians held that the doctrine affirmed by Casti Connubii was infallible, at least from the teachings of the Magisterium throughout the centuries; and that all of them agreed that there was no possibility of substantial change”. (cf. “Thou Shalt Love Life” by L. Brent Bozell in “Triumph”, September 1968, p. 22). One should not omit that the irrevocability of Casti Connubii was reaffirmed by Pope Pius XII in 1951 in his allocution to the Italian Catholic Society of Midwives.

We should not forget that the traditional doctrine of the Anglican Church until 1930 was “that the use of preventive methods is in all cases unlawful for a Christian”. Non-Catholic sects which have abandoned their traditional stand that contraception is a sin have often swung to the other extreme of portraying it as a duty. (cf. Contemporary Moral Theology, Vol. II, p. 254).

We should not forget that the traditional teaching of the Orthodox Church remains that “the use of contraceptive devices for the prevention of childbirth is forbidden and condemned unreservedly by the Greek Orthodox Church” (Greek Orthodox Handbook 1958). We remember that at the Congress of the World Council of Churches at Upsala, Sweden, in July, 1968 a resolution on Planned Parenthood was rejected by representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church on the grounds that it would (a) go against their consciences and (b) be an obstacle to ultimate union with the Roman Catholic Church. We have here a witness to ancient Christian tradition.
We should not forget that many today consider the doctrine forbidding artificial birth prevention as infallible or that the doctrine can be infallibly declared. Father Ford and Kelly said in 1963 “It is safe to say that it is at least definable doctrine and it is very likely already taught infallibly ex iugi magisterii”. (Contemporary Moral Theology, Vol. II, p. 277). A recent report says “The Reverend Dr. P. Cremin, who served on three Vatican Council commissions, including one on marriage said: “In my opinion the Pope’s teaching on unlawful birth control is infallible” (quoted from the Times, London, in Atlas, Oct. 1968, p. 29). Cardinal C. Journet, who has been considered by some the world’s greatest theologian, wrote in regard to “Humanae Vitae”: “The theologian who will reflect on the gravity of the matter, on the light in which it has been clarified, on the precision and certitude with which the response is given, will even be able to conclude that he is – this is our personal opinion – in the presence of a point of moral doctrine which could be later defined and accepted in the future with an assent of divine faith” (L’Osservatore Romano, Oct. 10th, 1968, p. 11).

3. The Encyclical “Humanae Vitae” Does Not Stand Alone

It is certain that the doctrine of Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical does not stand alone, although it well could by virtue of the authority supporting it. It has behind it ancient and universal tradition. It has behind it the weight of a constant Magisterium. It has behind it in a special way the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It can be called a universal norm which must always and everywhere be taught and preached.

St. Thomas More, after his formal trial and condemnation, was reminded that his decision not to take the oath of supremacy went against “the bishops, universities and best learned of this realm.” His reply was that for his part he had on his side countless of the dead, “of whom many be now holy saints in heaven.” He asked whether he was not bound to conform his conscience to the general Council of Christendom rather than the Council of one realm. He added “I have for every bishop of yours, above one hundred; and for one Council of Parliament, I have all the Councils made these thousand years.” (cf. “Thomas More” by Chambers; Jonathan Cape, 1935)

Is there not a parallel?

4. A Disciplinary Injunction Unheeded

We are all familiar with the injunctions of Pope Paul VI of June 23rd, 1964. One was doctrinal and one was disciplinary. The disciplinary injunction was: “it seems opportune to recommend that no one, for the present, takes it on himself to make pronouncements in forms different from the prevailing norms.” The Bishops of the world, for the most part, held their peace, silence and loyalty. But a sad drama began in earnest. Some theologians, near-theologians and would-be
theologians, by radio, television, journal, periodical, lecture and tape-recording began an assault on the traditional teaching of the Church.

It is not necessary to list the dissenters in Canada but to one book alone, published in 1964, three Canadians contributed articles contravening the injunctions of 1964. (cf. “Contraception and Holiness” introduced by Archbishop Thomas D. Roberts, S.J., Herder and Herder). Unfortunately the distinctions between speculative theology and normative theology were largely forgotten. In fairness it must be said that dissent was almost endemic among so-called Catholic intellectuals throughout the world. It is now too late to ask who was responsible for letting the voices be raised in dissent. In October 1966 the Holy Father insisted that the Magisterium was not “in a state of doubt”, in other words the teaching authority had never deviated from its clear teaching. As one writer put it “the defectors hooted him down”. So the stage was set for compromise.

**THE SETTING: PROXIMATE**

What is here written is not in the main from personal knowledge. What is quite certain is that at the Winnipeg meeting, September 23rd to September 27th, 1968 the Canadian Bishops were under great pressure to make a public statement on the encyclical “Humanae Vitae”.

(a) **Pressure of Time**

As one Bishop wrote: “The statement was produced in an almost incredibly short time by osme 80 bishops of two language groups” (Bishop Carney, in the B.C. Catholic, Oct. 3, 1968, p. 4) Another bishop has stated that the preliminary draft was not communicated to the Bishops until Tuesday morning, Sept. 24th. On the same day there were press announcements to the effect that the Bishops’ Statement would be released on or about Thursday of that week. It was not in fact released until later in the week, but one is amazed at the incredible pressure of time. A bishop has remarked that it would have been much more satisfactory if the first draft had been available a week or two before. I think many would concur, presuming that a preliminary draft were the best mode of procedure.

(b) **Pressure of Procedure**

Under the guidance of Bishop Remi de Roo of Victoria a theological commission prepared a tentative draft of the Winnipeg Statement before the meeting of the Bishops. The procedure has been publicized: “The bishops wisely decided on a modification of procedure of Vatican II to obtain a collegial statement without minority reports. A text prepared by the theological commission of Bishops, aided by periti was accepted as the basis for discussion by more than the required two-thirds majority. Successive texts were modified according to written or verbal
amendments, and the final text accepted piecemeal by simple majority.” ("Canadian Bishops on ‘Human Life’", by Rev. Edward Sheridan, S.J., America, Oct. 19th, 1968, p. 349) If the statement were an exclusively pastoral one, as Father Sheridan states, the rejection of minority reports and acceptance of paragraphs by simple majority would be justified. It is my opinion and that of many others that the Statement was not exclusively pastoral and, if this view is accepted, the absence of minority reports is unjustified and a violation of the consciences and rights of dissenting bishops. There seems to me to have been a pressure of procedure to obtain (a) a statement which would grow out of a previous draft rather than out of discussion and (b) a statement which would give a single voice to the Bishops. I consider this matter grave because the purely pastoral nature of the statement is arguable.

(c) **Pressure of Voices**

Pressures were exerted before the meeting through public and private media which were calculated in themselves, if not by intent, to draw the Bishops away from full assent to the Encyclical. Some but not all are here mentioned:

i) There was the nation-wide television program in which three Canadian theologians and one American theologian discussed the Encyclical and answered questions. The studio audience was a carefully selected one, including two priests who are known to dissent from the encyclical. Only the American theologian, Monsignor Vaughan, expressed full assent to the Encyclical and I have heard many priests and members of the laity express their admiration for his stand and presentation and clarity of thought.

ii) The co-ordinating committee of the Western Conference for Priests held a meeting at Calgary on the occasion of Bishop Paul O’Byrne’s consecration. A letter was sent over the signature of Rev. Ora McManus in August 28th. The intent was to rally support for a statement which would ask the Bishops of Canada to permit dissent from the Encyclical: “We urge, therefore, that a forthcoming statement of the Canadian Bishops address this particular problem. In so doing, it should include an unequivocal explanation of the conditions for prudent dissent, both internal and practical, on the part of the Catholic faithful.” No statement was prepared for those who wished to express assent to the Encyclical.

iii) A group of so-called Liberal Catholics in Toronto called “Catholics in Dialogue” formed by persons whose opposition to the Encyclical is well known, placed an advertisement in Toronto papers entitled “Speak a little louder, please: the Bishops ought to hear you.” It sought to organize voices to influence the Bishops at Winnipeg against full acceptance of “Humanae Vitae”.
iv) “In a provisional and non-official report of a meeting of the Societe Canadienne de theologie, a report widely circulated among the bishops at Winnipeg, a strong majority (52 to 14, with 7 abstentions) voted for effective recognition of the right of all Christians, including the poor and ignorant, to know the doubts of the Church on the question of contraception” (Rev. Edward Sheridan, S.J. in America, Oct. 19th, 1968, p. 352)

It is true that a voice-count or even mitre count are irrelevant when the Holy Father has already exercised his supreme and free authority. However, the Bishops at Winnipeg began their consideration of the Draft-Statement with the understanding that it was a purely pastoral one when this is much in doubt. Should not, therefore, the general content of letters and communications to the assembly have been analyzed and made known. One Bishop has stated that he knew nothing of the general content of the messages and telegrams forwarded to the Secretary-General of the Canadian Catholic Conference. From Toronto alone went many telegrams and messages offering full assent to the encyclical, not only from priests but from hundreds of the laity. The wording of a typical telegram, which came to my notice after the meeting stated: “We assent to the teaching of the Church through the Holy Father on birth-control or any other issue and protest the misleading result of poll founded on ambiguous questions and false preamble as submitted by Catholics in Dialogue”.

THE SUBSTANCE

1. Does the Winnipeg Statement Give Full Assent to “Humanae Vitae”?  

In the Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on “The Unity of the Church”, it is stated “But the Episcopal order is rightly judged to be in communion with Peter, if it be subject to and obeys Peter; otherwise it necessarily becomes a lawless and disorderly crowd”. (par. 56) Pope Paul VI called upon all members of the Church to prompt and generous adherence to his teaching and directives. He called upon priests to be the first, in the exercise of their ministry to give the example of loyal internal and external obedience to the teaching authority of the Church. He reminds priests that it is of the utmost importance for peace of conscience and unity of the Christian people that all should attend to the Magisterium of the Church in the field of morals as well as that of dogma. He says that all should speak the same language (cf. “Humanae Vitae”, par. 28) Surely and above all one expects the Shepherds of the flock to give full assent and obedience to the Vicar of Christ. “But it is opposed to the truth; and in evident contradiction with the divine institution of the Church, to hold that while each bishop is individually bound to obey the authority of the Roman Pontiffs, taken collectively the bishops are not so bound.” (Satis Cognitum, par. 57).

We are humiliated that in the context of “Humanae Vitae” the Winnipeg Statement has not given prompt and generous adherence. This is shown from its text and context.
(a) **There Was No Pretence Of Full Assent**

One bishop is quoted as follows: “It was something of an identity crisis. For the first time we faced the necessity of making a statement that many felt could not be a simple amen, a total and formal endorsement of the doctrine of the encyclical” (cf. “Canadian Bishops in ‘Of Human Life’” by Rev. Edward Sheridan, S.J., America, Oct. 19th, 1968, p. 349) Please note the words “for the first time”; “simple amen” and reference to the doctrine of the encyclical.

(b) **According To Reports There Was a Compromise With Opinion**

“We had to reckon with the fact of widespread dissent from some points of his (the Pope’s) teaching among the Catholic faithful, priests, theologians and probably certain of our own number”. (ibid.) If the last asserted probability is true, it is sad enough. But if these voices of dissent influenced the Bishops, we have tragedy. Who would ever claim that there was a scientific analysis of the voices of dissent, let alone of the argumentation of dissent? Who would claim that there was an analysis of the voices of assent, let alone of the argumentation for assent?

(c) **The Text of the Statement Withholds Full Assent**

In the section entitled “Solidarity with the Pope”, the Statement reads “We are in accord with the teaching of the Holy Father concerning the dignity of married life and the necessity of a truly Christian relationship between conjugal love and responsible parenthood.” (par. 2) There is no expression of full assent to the core doctrine of “Humanae Vitae”. This point is made by Father E. Sheridan, S.J., one of the theologians present, when he says: “the statement contained no general profession of assent to the whole teaching of Human Life, and nothing that could be interpreted as adding the local authority of the Canadian Hierarchy to that of the encyclical in general” (America, Oct. 19th, 1968, p. 349)

Absence of full assent even in doctrinal areas is implied in the words “The unity of the Church does not consist in a bland uniformity in all ideas – We stand in union with the Bishop of Rome - - But this very union postulates such a love of the Church that we can do no less than to place all our love and all of our intelligence at its service -- If this sometimes means that in our desire to make the Church more intelligible and more beautiful we must, as pilgrims do, falter in the way or differ as to the way--” (Par. 34). In its context these words, I believe, can only apply to the doctrine of the Holy Father on the matter of birth prevention. They imply also the right to judge the Vicar of Christ in a moral matter. “It is evident that the judgment of the Apostolic See, than which there is no authority greater, may be rejected by no one, nor is it lawful for anyone to pass judgment on its judgment” (Nicolaus in Epist. LXXXVI, ad Michael. Imperat. Footnote to par. 58 of the encyclical “Satis Cognitum”).

(d) **The Spirit of the Statement is Against Full Assent**
There is a diffuse spirit in the Statement which strikes one as slanted against full assent and in favour of an independent stand. Par. 3 speaks as though the Canadian Bishops had been delegated to clarify the difficult problems of morality involved in the present matter. One is inclined to ask: was this not reserved by the Holy Father to himself and by himself? Par. 4 seems to over-emphasize the difficulties the faithful are having and to forget the power of grace. Many of the People of God have received the Holy Father’s teaching with joy, understanding faith and a serene spirit of self-sacrifice. Typical reports of such reaction are: “I believe God never gives you more children than you can handle”; “She’s very happy to be ordered off the Pill”; “She defends the Pope vehemently”; “I believe the Pope’s divinely guided” (cf. Star Weekly, Oct. 25th, 1968). The Statement frequently reaffirms passages from Vatican Council II. In so doing it reaffirms the authority and binding power of the ordinary Magisterium. But it fails to reaffirm those passages of Vatican II most pertinent to the problems of artificial contraception (e.g. the Church Today, par. 51). The Statement talks of progress towards the solution of problems as though the Holy Father had not said “We now intend, by virtue of the mandate entrusted to Us by Christ, to give our reply to these grave problems.” (Humanae Vitae, par. 6) The statements on freedom of conscience over-emphasize subjective criteria. Many more instances could be quoted in which one misses the spirit of “Humanae Vitae”.

2. Does the Winnipeg Statement Communicate Assent to “Of Human Life”?

I think it fair to say what Dale Francis has said: “Although it was undoubtedly not the intention of the Catholic Bishops of Canada when they issued their statement on the Pope’s Encyclical, Humanae Vitae, the practical consequence has been that it has been interpreted as virtually negating the Pope’s proscription of contraceptions”. (“Truth and Consequence in Canada” by Dale Francis, Twin Circle, Oct. 20, 1968, p. 7). This interpretation is widespread among both priests and people and takes several forms.

(a) To Some It Endorses a National Church

The National Catholic Reporter, in its issue of Oct. 9th, 1968 refers to the Statement as a “Canadian Credo”. A leading Canadian Catholic paper “The Register”, on Oct. 5th, 1968, printed an editorial “comment” which said “It will take weeks, perhaps months, for Canadians to appreciate and really believe what happened at Winnipeg last week. It has not happened in the Church – anywhere – for centuries. And in Canada, perhaps for the first time in our history we can now become a truly Canadian Church in the deepest sense of the word.”

(b) To Many It Means “Let Conscience Be Your Guide”.

The above phrase “Let Conscience be your Guide” was the heading of the text of the Statement as it appeared in the Canadian “Register”. Under the heading of “Soft Line on Contraception” Time Magazine, Oct. 4th, 1968 reports: “The Canadian Bishops even more strongly suggested that in the conflict between the encyclical’s teaching and the burdens of parenthood, ‘whoever honestly choose the course which seems right to him does so in good conscience’”. The National Catholic Reporter, Oct. 2nd, 1968, under the headline “Canada: Yes on Conscience”, says: “The Canadian Bishops last week formally approved the use of informed personal
conscience in the contraceptive issue...” The Reporter quoted a Bishop spokesman as agreeing with a questioner who held that the Canadian Statement is a “historic moment in the Church” since the statement interprets and develops a papal encyclical rather than following every teaching of the Pope in specific detail. Another Bishop is quoted as saying that the Canadian statement penetrated to the heart of the meaning of the encyclical in rejecting a “contraceptive mentality in marriage” but allowing people to follow the demands of their conscience. 

The Toronto Star, Oct. 7th, 1968, reporting on two sermons given in St. Michael’s Cathedral on the Winnipeg Statement had this heading: “Catholics told Pill is personal matter”. A Toronto mother, founder of a charitable organization, wrote: “The Bishops’ text in the encyclical puzzles me. I am afraid there are many Catholics who accept it as a whole-hearted approval of contraception. I wonder at times, if our bishops really know what the ordinary people think like.” (Personal letter, Oct. 5th, 1968).

“The issue is now over in Canada. Roman Catholics are free to use contraceptives if their informed conscience prompts them.” (Canadian Catholic journalist Douglas Roche, as quoted in Twin Circle, Oct. 20th, 1968 p. 6)

(c) To Some It Means Compromise and Ambivalence

One Toronto mother writes: “Upon reading the entire document given in the Toronto Daily Star yesterday, we felt that Section I appears singularly misleading through omission, and that the conclusion seems to rationalize an evident lack of solidarity with the Papal teaching in the third sentence commencing: ‘The Unity of the Church does not consist in a bland conformity in all ideas --’ throughout the document we get the feeling that they are talking out of both sides of their mouth”. (Personal letter, Oct. 2, 1968). A poll was taken of members of the laity and printed in the Toronto Star of Oct. 5th, 1968. A typical reaction and one of the more polite ones stated: “The statement is worded in such a way that if you want approval for practising birth-control, you’ll find it in there and if you’re against it, you’ll find support for that too.” One correspondent says: “The whole section (par. 17) is a prime example of double-think, which is the ability to hold two diametrically opposed views in one’s mind at the same time and believe both of them.” (John C. Caines, Ladner, B.C. in the “B.C. Catholic”, Oct. 17th, 1968).

Literally hundreds of similar statements could be quoted.

I submit that to the vast majority, including Bishops, priests and the world, the Winnipeg Statement does not communicate full assent to “Humanae Vitae”, and that to hundreds of priests and countless thousands of laity it communicates dissent.

3. Questions of Consciences and the Winnipeg Statement

a) The question of birth regulation involves not only the consciences of the parties but of many others. Involved also are the consciences of public authorities who must weigh the Winnipeg Statement in the light of the papal admonition: “Do not allow the morality of your peoples to be degraded; do not permit that by legal means practises contrary to the natural and divine law be introduced into that fundamental cell, the family”. (Par. 23) It involves the consciences of Ordinaries, Vicar Generals, Officials, Chancellors, theologians, pastors, assistant pastors, confessors, catechetical directors, teachers, social service directors, doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage counsellors and others.
b) The Winnipeg Statement involves the consciences of many besides the parties not in one way but in many ways. They must ask themselves whether the Statement gives full assent to the teaching of the Holy Father; if it does not they must ask themselves in what manner or modes it differs. They must ask themselves which interpretation of the Statement they are to accept, for there are already several. They must ask themselves whether the Statement has any validity at all in certain phrases. They must ask themselves how far the mandate of the Canadian Bishops goes. They must ask themselves how it can be reconciled with Vatican II and previous magisterial teaching canonized by Vatican Council II. This list could be extended. I think it certain that the Winnipeg Statement has raised far more questions than it has answered.

c) The principal questions of conscience in the Winnipeg Statement centre around paragraph 26. We are told that certain persons “may be safely assured that whoever honestly chooses that course which seems right to him does so in good conscience.”

What are the conditions by which persons qualify for this advice? According to Par. 26:

(a) They accept the teaching of the Holy Father.

(b) Because of certain circumstances they are involved in what seems to them a clear conflict of duties, e.g. the reconciling of conjugal life and responsible parenthood with the education of children already born or with the health of the mother.

(c) They have tried sincerely but without success to pursue a line of conduct in keeping with the given directives.

We note first of all that we are not dealing with those in invincible error. We are dealing with those who accept the teaching of the Holy Father. If this is so they are not really involved in an objective conflict of duties. Acceptance of the teaching of the Holy Father includes acceptance of his clear and unambiguous doctrine that every act of marital relations must be left open to the transmission of life. It means an acceptance of the teaching of the Holy Father of the grave consequences of methods of artificial birth control. It means an acceptance of the principle that it is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil so that good may follow therefrom (cf. Humanae Vitae, par. 14).

In effect we are told that persons who believe it morally wrong to practise artificial contraception, if they have tried sincerely but without success to keep the directives, may practise artificial contraception. Is this not to advise them to against their own conscience?

To go further, such persons who believe contraception is morally wrong can be safely assured that whoever honestly chooses that course which seems right to him does so in good conscience. Is he then to disregard his own conscience and make up his own morality? Where is he to stop: May he be assured that it is right for him, who believes it wrong, to practise mutual masturbation, homosexuality, surgical sterilization, abortion, sodomy, adultery, fellatio, masochism, sadism? Where does the permission to transform vice into virtue stop?
d) Because to accept Par. 26 literally involves the acceptance of a contradiction we must assume that the advice really refers to those who do not accept the teaching of the Holy Father and who therefore not only have a problem of implementing the doctrine but of accepting its truth. In this case one must presume that all reasonable means have been taken to dissuade them from their error but they remain in invincible ignorance. Even in such a case how can a priest rightfully tell them that whoever honestly chooses that course which seems right to him does so in good conscience? This advice is surely more dangerous than even the last resort in dealing with a person afflicted with an invincible erroneous conscience: “You must act logically in accordance with your error”.

e) It is not an exaggeration to predict that, human nature being what it is, the kind of advice formulated in Par. 26 is calculated to produce a generation of married parties with consciences invincibly erroneous. One must admit the existence of erroneous consciences, “But was it not Diderot who replied to Rousseau that one knew that whatever he did, he would always have his conscience for him?” (Cardinal Journet, L’Osservatore Romano, Oct. 10th, 1968, p. 11).

f) We have been talking about the consciences of the parties, principally. Now what about the conscience of the confessor? It is one thing to judge a conscience to be erroneous. It is another to absolve a person with an invincibly erroneous conscience. Since in the present matter the priest must follow the teaching authority of the Church he can hardly absolve one living in objectively grave sin who does not have a purpose of amendment or a willingness to remove the free proximate occasion of sin. If the contrary were the case one would be obliged to absolve the bigamist who claims good faith or the heretic or murderer in good faith regardless of a decision to remain in an objectively sinful state.

g) Evidently the priest who cannot in conscience uphold the Church’s authoritative teaching in a grave matter should ask to be relieved of his office of hearing confessions or preaching. “…it is unacceptable that a priest, in or outside of confession, in his capacity as a religious guide, should assume a negative attitude with respect to objective divine or ecclesiastical laws with which he can no longer agree. If he his convinced in good faith that honesty of conscience no longer allows him to accept certain laws, the same honesty will force him to function no longer as the representative of a Church of which he rejects some essential positions. In such a case his honesty of conscience will make him ask his superiors to free him, at least for a time, of those tasks in which his conscience would conflict with his function in the Church”. (“Sin, Liberty and Law” by Louis Munden, S.J., Sheed and Ward, 1965, p. 143).

CIRCUMSTANCES AND CONSEQUENCES

1. Sophistry – Where Can You Lead Us?

No one, I think, upheld more strongly the rights of conscience than St. Thomas More. He also upheld the rights of theologians. But in treating of the latter he warned of the dangers of sophistry. He said “sophists lead us to a spot where we are surprised to find ourselves. They
accomplish this through their deceptive use of words.” (Letter to Martin Dorp, Oct. 21st, 1515). It is hard to find a subject which has lent itself more to the art of sophistry than the whole question of birth-prevention. Examples in this area are: “if a document is not infallible, it must be fallible” (Louis Dupre, author of “Contraception and Catholics”, “Knowledge requisite for mortal sin is not merely theoretical or speculative. It must be evaluative or appreciative -- therefore, if one individual still says that he does not honestly feel in his heart that artificial contraception is wrong, he should not be deprived of the sacraments unless it is certain that his conscience is vincibly erroneous” (Chicago Studies, Summer 1968, pp. 222-223); “Internal consent demanded by ordinary magisterial teaching is not an absolute – therefore the ordinary magisterium does not always require internal consent”; “abnormal equals pathological, therefore the pill can be used to regulate in all cases an irregular menstrual cycle or it can be used during the lactation period”; “The Church’s teaching may change in the future – therefore we are not bound to it now”. The list may be extended indefinitely. Since sophisms are so prevalent in this field, where the conscience grasps at straws, we are not surprised to see a goodly number in the Winnipeg Statement. A few examples, among others, are given:

a) A section heading is “Solidarity with the Pope”. This promise is not borne out in the text, which expresses only a partial solidarity. This is a sophism.

b) “We are acting consistently with our recent submissions to the federal government on contraception, divorce and abortion, nor is there anything in those submissions which does not harmonize with the encyclical”. (Par. 3) In my opinion, this is a sophism.

c) “This does not exempt a man from the responsibility of forming his conscience according to truly Christian values and principles. This implies a spirit of openness to the teaching of the Church which is an essential aspect of the Christian’s baptismal vocation”. (Par. 10) This is sophism minimizing the obligation of the Catholic to not only form his conscience or have a spirit of openness but to conform his conscience. Speaking of the evolution of the text of Vatican Council II, Cardinal Felici says “The expression ‘conscience to be enlightened by the divine law’ was replaced by the more precise ‘conscience to be conformed to the divine law’” (cf. L’Osservatore Romano, Oct. 4th, 1968, p. 6). The Statement itself repeats the more precise terminology of Vatican II (Par. 12). It is difficult to understand the Statement’s repetition of less precise and more lax terminology, e.g. when it says of the Holy Father’s encyclical: “Christians must examine in all honesty their reaction to what he has said”. (Par. 13)

d) “Today, the Holy Father has spoken on the question of morally acceptable means to harmonize conjugal love and responsible parenthood.” (Par. 13) This is a sophism because the Holy Father did much more than speak on these questions. He gave plain, firm, unambiguous and authoritative answers.

e) “It follows that those who have been commissioned by the Church to teach in her name will recognize their responsibility to refrain from public opposition to the encyclical; to do otherwise would compound confusion and be a source of scandal to God’s people”. This is a sophism. One asks: what about the internal assent demanded by the ordinary magisterial teaching? May we then dissent in the confessional, in study groups etc., in private conservation etc.? Why the word “public” and what does it mean?
f) “This must not be interpreted as a restriction on the legitimate and recognized freedom of theologians--” (Par. 16) This, in context is a sophism, because it does not clearly distinguish between normative and speculative theology and in fact, theologians see here a possible loophole for more normative action. For example, one theologian states in reference to the freedom of theologians: “This being so, the pastor in his preaching and the counselor of souls (and many others) might well feel an obligation to enlighten groups and individuals as to the liberty of conscience that others enjoy. It hardly seems satisfactory to say that as a private person he may in good conscience (at least subjectively) suspend assent, but may not expose the basis of that doubt” (Edward F. Sheridan, S.J. in “America”, Oct. 19th, 1968, p. 352).

g) “In conformity with traditional Christian morality” (Par. 20). This is a sophism because all that follows is not in accord with traditional Christian morality.

h) “In accord with the accepted principles of moral theology” (Par. 26). This is a sophism because what follows is dubiously in accord with the accepted principles of moral theology.

i) “We stand in union with the Bishop of Rome -- If this sometimes means -- we must -- differ as to the way” (Par. 34) This is a sophism because it nullifies the traditional and obvious sense of the words: “We stand in union with the Bishop of Rome”. It means in effect “with some exceptions” we stand in union with the Bishop of Rome.

This list is not taxative, and certainly sophistry is not intended but when we read the whole Statement we are in a spot where we are surprised to find ourselves.

2. Where Are The Sheep Being Led?

It is clear from what has already happened in Canada that an ambiguous re-affirmation of the Encyclical is leading many astray. Here are current consequences, not intended, but a reality nonetheless:

a) There is opening up to many a new and decadent world of subjective morality. Many confessors have already had the Winnipeg Statement quoted against them.

b) There is a movement towards a pluralistic morality based on national boundaries. We are thrown back to the 16th century when the trial of Thomas More was the inevitable result of conflict between the national and supra-national outlooks.

c) Parishes are divided – assistant against assistant – pastor against assistant – confessor against confessor – group against group – the older against the younger – the “new breed” against the “old breed” – the intellectual against the common man – the proud against the meek – preacher against preacher – speaker against speaker. What is not debatable is considered so. This state has increased in Canada since the Winnipeg Statement.

d) Religious communities are divided. I know of one house where the subject of birth-prevention and the Winnipeg Statement is taboo because of the bitterness engendered.

e) Many are having their faith tried and some are falling away.
f) The authority of the Bishops is weakened. How can secondary authority stand if primary authority is not upheld? If Bishops do not fully uphold the supreme, universal and free authority of the Holy See, how can they expect their own authority to be upheld? An enemy of the Church was perceptive enough to say: “The Pope and the Bishops sink or swim together”. If criticism of the Holy Father’s Encyclical is permitted in our pulpits, or the Winnipeg Statement is used against the Encyclical in our pulpits – as it has – what is going to happen to the authority of our Bishops? We want to see that authority upheld as is due members of the apostolic succession.

g) Are we not being led into a position where the authority of the Holy Father is open to attack? We are ashamed to see sold in some churches in Canada the National Catholic Reporter which had as its lead article on Oct. 9th, 1968 “How to get the papal monkey off the Catholic back” by Daniel Callahan, formerly of Commonweal.

I submit that the present lack of unambiguous support for the Encyclical tends to unwarranted subjectivism, intellectual snobbery and a position where revealed religion, with its basis of authority, is losing for many its credibility and relevancy.

3. Look For A Rising Ratio Of Invalid And Illicit Marriages

(a) It is certain that marriages are null if either party enters marriage with a positive intention of denying the right to children (the “bonum prolis”). Even the intention to deny this right through abortion would nullify the union. This applies even if the right is temporarily excluded, whether for a decade, a year, a month or a day.

(b) We know that in jurisprudence it is at present necessary to prove that the intention was a permanent one or was an indefinite one (the “si et quando” rule) or that circumstances were such that it is morally certain that the right itself was excluded.

(c) If Par. 26 of the Winnipeg Statement is taken to mean what many will and have interpreted it to mean – a great many more young persons entering marriage will be reserving to themselves the right to decide when and if they should have children. This will increase both the number of invalid unions, the stability of married life in many instances and many more will enter objectively sinful states.

(d) Among other purposes, the prenuptial investigation is intended to determine that the parties enter marriage validly. Already in some instances the question: “Do you intend to abide by the teaching of the Catholic Church in the matter of birth-prevention?” has been dropped from the prenuptial questionnaire. In some cases it has been modified so that a positive answer does not indicate whether the marriage consent is either valid or sinful.

I submit that the Winnipeg Statement tends by its spirit of permissiveness to proliferate such careless preliminary investigations. It is easy for the priest, easy for the parties but it may often defeat the purpose of the questionnaire and may mortally hurt the marriage.
4. Assent Of Faith, Religious Assent And the Winnipeg Statement

Because the Holy Father’s Encyclical is not designated as infallible doctrine, it does not evidently demand the assent of faith in the technical sense. This has led many to conclude that it deserves no more adherence than the argumentation on which it is based. So we read: “In the case of birth control, the fact that Rome has spoken makes it but another voice in the discussion, rather than the voice which ends all discussion.” (Philip Scharper in “The Critic”, Oct.-Nov. 1968, p. 14). Again we read: “The present dissent from the papal teaching on birth control is unique in as much as it is based on Catholic theological principles or, in the case of the many lay people who have joined the theologians, on lessons from Christian Experience” (Ecclesiological Commentary on ‘Humanae Vitae’ by Gregory Baum, the Ecumenist, Sept.-Oct. 1968, p. 181).

Another similar and more direct statement is: “Since the Pope has expressly, and perhaps wisely, repudiated infallibility in this connection, the authority of Humanae Vitae boils down to precisely that of the rational cogency of the arguments contained in it. The papal mystique, and references to the standards of Christ, have nothing to do with the matter. Many Catholic theologians and laity have taken hold of the point, and opposed their reason to the Pope’s. That is what is new in the present situation, and the Pope’s surprise and mortification have been evident from his subsequent comments” (“Crisis Among Catholics: Pope, Pill and Authority” by William Nicholls, in Saturday Night, Oct. 1968, p. 45).

The above-quoted authors speak from theological ignorance or naivety. The teaching of “Humanae Vitae” is the teaching of the Church (see Appendix II of this brochure) and to it is owed religious assent both internal and external. It can be asserted that because of constant Christian tradition, the constant repetition of the doctrine in a magisterial way and because of the solemn and unambiguous nature of its promulgation it would be difficult to find a moral teaching to which religious assent is to be more firmly given.

Some have tried to use the phrase “absolute” assent of faith as though to oppose it to “qualified” religious assent. The essential point is that doctrine to which is owed religious assent is held with normative or moral certainty at the least. The president of the Catholic Theological Society of America expresses this clearly: “I can know the will of God for me with absolute certainty through fallible teaching. This is an axiom of Catholic moral teaching, which says that I must follow a solidly probable opinion if there is no other one that is probable (on the simple grounds that it is the best I have available in the practical order, and I have to make a practical decision). It is basic to all Catholic spirituality when the matter of conformity to the will of God is being considered.” (“Msgr. Vaughan answers Critic” in the National Reporter, Sept. 11, 1968, p. 4).

Appendix I of this commentary lists some magisterial teaching concerning the obligation to give religious assent, both internal and external, to the ordinary teaching authority of the Church, with special reference to encyclicals. In the normative order it is never a prostitution of reason to follow the teaching proclaimed by the Head of the Church acting by virtue of the mandate given him by Christ. “It is nonsense for a Catholic to set up in opposition to the authority of the Encyclical the authority of his own personal conscience” (“The Light of the Encyclical” by Cardinal C. Journet, L’Osservatore Romano, Oct. 10, 1968, p. 10).

The Winnipeg Statement seems to me to deviate from supreme magisterial teaching in applying the doctrine of religious assent.
a) It refers to the absolute assent of faith (Par. 14). This seems a redundancy and an implication that religious assent may be legitimately suspended or qualified in this matter.

b) Par. 16 does qualify the obligation of religious assent by referring only to public opposition.

c) Par. 17 carries this qualification further in several ways: it implies that the brevity of the argumentation of the encyclical weakens its binding force. It implies that men of science or culture or education might reasonably find it harder to accept than others. It implies that to suspend assent is no rejection of the teaching authority of the Church.

I submit that the Statement conveys an incorrect concept of religious assent, its nature and its binding force.

5. Scandal of Scandals

One sometimes hears the reasoning that it is better to let dissenting priests go on teaching, preaching and counselling in contradiction to the Church’s teaching. Otherwise their defection from the priesthood or their rebellion or a public statement against dissenters would be a scandal to the faithful. Surely to permit them to lead the faithful into error and objective sin is the scandal of scandals. Do we not see that to permit such dissent will in the end produce more defecting priests, laity to support them, contempt for the Church, contempt for authority, situation ethics, proud subjectivism and a marxist-like existentialism? True charity towards the dissenters can frown as well as smile.

6. Should There Be a National Morality?

We all know there are a few ecumenists insinuating the need for a national or cultural morality. We read: “The Catholic people belong to diverse cultural environments and hence have different experiences of moral values. While the general principles of morality are universal, it is a question whether the Church can propose a uniform set of detailed moral norms applicable to all men. The evaluation of birth control depends in part on the situation of the family in society, on the state of women, on the place assigned to personal conscience, and on many other factors of social life…The present crisis over the papal encyclical brings to light the need for greater pluriformity in the unity of the Catholic Church.” (Gregory Baum in “The Ecumenist”, Sept.-Oct. 1968, p. 185). The sophistry in this presentation is evident but do we not see also some distortion of values in a few National Statements on the Encyclical. I am personally unable to see in the Winnipeg Statement directives which have any special validity for Canada, with its multi-cultural background. Further, since it withholds full assent to the Encyclical how can its pastoral norms have full validity? Surely pastoral norms or directives should flow directly from sound principles as they do in the Encyclical. We cannot help but notice how many National Statements begin in complete accord with the Encyclical and develop their directives from that base.

CONCLUSIONS
1. The Winnipeg Statement has withheld full assent to the Papal Encyclical. To many this is the equivalent of dissent. “The right to dissent has been acknowledged, in varying degrees of strength, by the national hierarchies of Germany, Belgium, Holland and Canada” (Gregory Baum in “The Ecumenist”, Sept.-Oct. 1968, p. 181).

2. The Winnipeg Statement has communicated dissent.

3. The Winnipeg Statement has had divisive effects on the Church in Canada.

4. The Winnipeg Statement is in need of correction and revision.

5. The Winnipeg Statement is corrosive of the legitimate authority not only of the Holy Father, but of Bishops and priests.

OPTIONS FOR UNITY

In the Encyclical Pope Paul quotes the Apostle Paul: “I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment”. (I Cor. 1, 10)

To bring about this unity is now only an ideal. To teach and preach the authoritative doctrine of the Church is an obligation. To do this with unity as a goal requires wisdom and charity aided by grace. The following suggestions may be considered presumptuous; but they are only suggestions.

1. **Action In Common**

   a) Since further guidelines have been promised by the Canadian Bishops would it not be proper in these to correct apparent contradictions and apparent ambiguities?

   b) Would it not be advisable in a subsequent document to express full and unequivocal assent to “Humanae Vitae”?

   c) Would it not be advisable to condemn all dissent, public or in the confessional, on the part of all priests in all branches of the ministry? The Bishops of England and Wales promulgated this edict of October 24th: “Priests are required in preaching, teaching, in the press, on radio, television or public platforms to refrain from opposing the teaching of the Pope in all matters of faith and morals. If a priest is unwilling to accept this ruling, the bishop will decide whether he can be allowed without scandal to continue to act in the name of the Church. Although he need not be required to cease celebrating Mass, a priest may not normally hold faculties to hear Confessions without undertaking to declare faithfully the objective teaching of Humanae Vitae in the confessional and when giving spiritual guidance” (quoted from “The National Register”, Denver, Nov. 3, 1968, p. 1).

   d) Would it not be proper also to confine additional guidelines strictly to the area of pastoral theology, e.g., the means of helping to implement the pastoral directives of “Humanae
Vitae”? Directives on preaching, teaching and supporting the doctrine in every way would be helpful. So also would the curtailment of further research and pronouncements on the part of theologians to the speculative field.

e) Would it not be proper to encourage all societies, study groups and associations to express their full assent to the Encyclical and to study it in this context?

f) Should not more emphasis be placed on the principle that true love or charity must always be based on true doctrine, regardless of the sacrifices involved?

g) Would it not perhaps be helpful if our Bishops were to express their concern to those National Conferences of Bishops which have withheld full assent?

h) Should the proper nature of collegiality not be widely proclaimed so that the faithful will not be confused when the Holy Father acts freely by virtue of his supreme authority? “The college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is simultaneously conceived of in terms of its head, the Roman Pontiff, Peter’s successor, and without any lessening of his power of primacy over all, pastors as well as the general faithful” (Vatican II, The Church, par. 22). This is not to say that the Ordinary power of Bishops should not also be more clearly explained so that their proper authority will be loyally upheld.

i) Would it not be worthwhile also to study those declarations of National Conferences of Bishops which have without ambiguity given full assent to the Encyclical. Many of these, e.g. the one from India, come from countries suffering from over-population and yet are unswerving in their directives and helpful in their pastoral advice.

2. Action with the Holy Father

a) Should not Bishops in their own Dioceses, as some have done since the Winnipeg Statement, proclaim their full assent to the Encyclical?

b) Should not Bishops in their own Dioceses always prefer the unambiguous pastoral guidelines of the Holy Father when the Winnipeg Statement is interpreted to be at variance?

c) Should not Bishops in their own Dioceses in charity and prudence, take all necessary means to protect the faithful against the voices of dissenting priests and against the Catholic press when it dissents?

d) Should not Bishops who disagree with the “modus agendi” at Winnipeg so speak as to prevent its repetition?

e) Should not individual Bishops also, our Shepherds in Christ, to whom Our Holy Father listens before all others, express to the Supreme Pontiff their complete assent of mind and judgment?