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UNH Catholic Scholar: U.S. Catholics Consider Birth Control A Private -- Not A Church -- Decision

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DURHAM, N.H. – Michele Dillon, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire and the J.E. and Lillian Byrne Tipton Distinguished Visiting Professor in Catholic Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is available to discuss U.S. Catholics and the issue of artificial contraception.

Dillon has written extensively on Catholicism in the United States and elsewhere, and has been especially interested in the institutional and cultural processes that enable Catholics who selectively disagree with aspects of Catholic teaching to remain loyal to Catholicism. She also has examined the political engagement of the Catholic Church, and of other churches and activist organizations, in public moral debates in different western countries. She is the author of “Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power.”

Dillon provided the following commentary on the topic:

“Among many other doctrinal developments, Vatican II (1962-1965) affirmed the importance of a differentiation between church and state, religious freedom, an informed personal conscience, and Catholics’ obligation to fully participate in the life of the Church and of society. A couple of years later, in 1968, Pope Paul VI issued Humanae Vitae, an encyclical in which he affirmed the church’s opposition to artificial birth control. This ruling was a major surprise to many theologians, priests and lay Catholics. In the wake of Humanae Vitae, many Catholics stopped going to Mass, believing that they could not be good Catholics while using artificial birth control. Some never returned. But many did return and chose, in conscience, to go to Mass and Communion while not desisting from contraceptive use.

This shift away from deference to church authority is a watershed in contemporary Catholicism and marks the turning point when Catholics decided to be Catholic on their own terms; especially evident in their differentiation between what they consider to be core to Catholicism (e.g., theology of belief, etc.) and what they consider less central (e.g., church teaching on contraception, sexual morality). Since the early 1980s, reliable representative studies of American Catholics consistently indicate that the vast majority of Catholics, women and men, believe that one can be a good Catholic without obeying the church hierarchy’s teaching on birth control. This attitude also extends to divorce and remarriage, and, increasingly today, to same-sex marriage.

In 2011, for example, 78 percent of Catholics said that one can be a good Catholic without obeying church teaching on contraception. This view is slightly more pronounced among Catholic women than men, though it is common to vary large majorities of both and it is shared equally and across all generations. Even among the most highly committed Catholics -- those who go to Mass weekly, who say they would never leave the church, and who say that the church is among the most important parts of their life -- 60 percent agree that one can be a good Catholic without obeying church teaching on birth control.

Further, only a small minority of Catholics (10 percent in 2011, 12 percent in 1987), believe that church leaders -- rather than individuals or individuals in collaboration with church leaders -- should have the final say about the morality of Catholic decision-making regarding contraception.

In short, Catholics have long considered birth control an issue on which they should make up their own minds.

So while one can appreciate that the Catholic bishops and the leaders of Catholic colleges and hospitals may see the current political controversy as an issue of ‘religious liberty,’ ironically, for most rank and file Catholics, their decision not to adhere to the church’s opposition to contraception is evince of their exercise of
religious liberty. Nonetheless, of course, the bishops’ decision to frame the issue as one of religious liberty is politically significant; it is a rhetorical framing that has deep emotional valence in the United States, and especially in an election year. It is highly unlikely, however, that the bishops’ stand will change many Catholic minds about the morality and use of contraception.

On the other hand, it may backfire for some Catholic colleges: Having worked diligently for many decades to establish strong regional or national reputations as culturally inclusive institutions, bringing opposition to contraception to the fore may prompt some current/prospective students (and their parents) to reassess the wisdom in attending a Catholic college.”

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